THE CASE FOR REASON

Understanding the
Anti-superstition Movement

NARENDRA DABHOLKAR

Translated by SUMAN OAK

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Prologue

I have authored about a dozen books on different aspects of the Andhashraddha Nirmoolan Samiti's (ANiS, or the Committee for the Eradication of Superstition) movement. It is gratifying that each book has gone into several editions. I have also written about it in the newspapers and given thousands of speeches on the subject. All in all, I have been speaking and working to eradicate superstition and to engender a scientific outlook and propagate rationalism for the last twenty-five years. Yet I felt obliged to write this book. I must explain why.

For one, my own comprehension of the subject has now matured. Besides, I also realise that an orderly exposition on superstition and rationalism has not so far been attempted by my predecessors. Many social reformers have written on specific aspects of the movement, which were more often than not topical and related to issues of their time. I did attempt an organised, logical exposition earlier, but when I look at it today, it seems quite inadequate. The movement for the eradication of superstition has many dimensions. And in all humility, I think that no other movement is as multidimensional and multifaceted as the Maharashtrian campaign.

The book is divided into two parts. The first part pertains to the theoretical basis of the movement. It is meant to be thought-provoking, and deals with various aspects of the Andhashraddha Nirmoolan (eradication of superstition). The issue often raised —'Does ANiS confine itself to eradicating the superstitions of Hindu society alone?'—is also discussed.

The second part is about some of ANiS's vigorous struggles. It is an account of the actual work done in relation to the theoretical reasoning that is discussed in the first part. Only a few examples and anecdotes have been discussed here owing to limitations of space. Also, in this part of the book, I have largely

confined myself to issues that I was directly involved in. This list is fairly exhaustive too, so I have chosen one or two incidents from each area of work. But when read together with the theoretical section, I hope that they will give the reader an idea of the movement's vastness.

Three specific issues handled by ANiS will, I hope, also enable the reader to understand the many aspects of the problem too:

1) The process of exposing the miracle claimed to be performed in the temple of the so-called jagrit deity (a deity in the full exercise of its divinity) in the Sindhudurg district;
2) Confronting the godman Narendra Maharaj in his own monastery at Nanij in Ratnagiri district, Maharashtra, and exposing all his miracles through a blunt one-on-one debate;
3) How the fraudulent story of Ganesh idols drinking milk all over the country and even abroad was exposed.

Then there is a letter written to the then chief minister of Maharashtra, Shri Vilasrao Deshmukh, a Sathya Sai Baba devotee, informing him why I did not wish to accept the Award for the Best Publisher from him.

In this part, there are also stories of two types of mental illness which we encountered in the course of our work. One is called 'bhanamati' or 'causing nuisance'. The chapter 'A Case of Bhanamati Resolved' is an interesting and revelatory tale. The second type—fatalism—is even more dangerous, and so, to fight it, a programme called 'Incineration of Fatalism' was arranged. Here, ANiS workers set their own horoscopes on fire. A movement conducted to oppose the introduction of astrology as a subject of study in the curriculum at the university level is discussed in this part. Similarly there is an account of how ANiS exposed the new fad called 'vastushastra'.

A critique of religion is the real test of the efficacy of a movement like ANiS. At Shani Shinganapur, a village in Maharashtra where devotees flock to the temple of Shani, the Hindu god associated with the planet Saturn, women are not allowed to climb the platform where the deity is positioned even today. Of late, the managing committee of the Devasthan is chaired by a woman who continues the ban. [1] When ANiS sat in

satyagraha against this ban on women, there was a huge commotion. This reaction is a glimpse into how sensitive the field where ANiS works is.

Rationalists argue endlessly about the existence of god. Some maintain that the eradication of superstitions is not possible unless the concept of god is refuted. ANiS takes a different stand on this matter. Lively debates on awakening the faculty of discernment, or vivek jagar—are often held, and are an important part of the ANiS's action plan. This strategy has two more dimensions. There are a few organisations that actively work to obstruct ANiS's work. The Sanatan Bharateeya Sanstha has launched fourteen personal lawsuits against me. There are other organisations that call themselves friends of the movement at a conceptual level, and accuse it of not criticising brahminical rites and rituals or brahmin godmen, just because I am brahmin by birth. They make the accusation that ANiS's work is in fact a part of a brahminical plot to deceive gullible common people. This is an accusation that has been made time and again. I present, therefore, how we convert our theoretical position into positive action, and how the whole organisation is involved in evaluating this decision. The structure of the Maharashtra ANiS is peculiar in many ways, which the essay, 'The Source of All This' takes note of.

For this book, I am indebted to many writers. Some of the major writers from whom I have benefited are Tarkateerh Lakshman Shastri Joshi, G.B. Saradar, M.P. Rege, D.K. Bedekar, D.D. Bandiste, Subodh Javadekar, S.M. Garge, A.H. Salunkhye, Raosaheb Kasbe and Yashvant Suman. There are many others who have not been mentioned—I am indebted and grateful to all of them. Any shortcomings or flaws that remain are mine.

I end this prologue with a short note on the present status of the movement. When the movement was initiated, its work was looked upon as an activity against buvabaji (the activities of godmen), ghosts, bhanamati, sorcery and other such practices. This struggle, although complementary to the Reform Movement, was still only a minor action item. During the last twenty years, however, ANiS has progressed through the several stages of action: the eradication of superstition, scientific way of thinking, scientific outlook, critique of religion, secularism and rationalism. Even as we discuss rationalism, we are keenly aware

of two important concerns. Firstly, ANiS respects those who want to be moral with the help of god and religion. ANiS, however, wants to maintain its moral rectitude solely by depending on its own conscience. Secondly, ANiS believes that it is necessary to intervene effectively but peacefully and democratically in the social life of people by enhancing their reasoning capacity; we ought to create a world better than the one we have today. This is utterly necessary and also achievable. This is the mission of the rationalist movements of the day.

I will be gratified if this book encourages the reader to progress a step further in this direction.

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1 In April 2016, temple trustees decided to facilitate unrestricted entry following a High Court directive

PART ONE

THE THEORETICAL BASIS OF THE ANTI-SUPERSTITION MOVEMENT

1

Understanding Scientific Outlook

The significance of a scientific outlook

The term 'scientific outlook' can be defined simply as 'understanding the cause–effect relationship of any incident or examining the cause–effect relationship between two incidents'. Going by this simple definition, it must be said that Indian society has continued to remain unscientific even in the age of science. To develop a scientific outlook, one does not need to be a scientist or even a science graduate. What is required is mere curiosity to know and understand the natural laws on the basis of which the whole physical environment around us operates. The Renaissance Movement had stirred up Europe, swept away superstitions there and, to a large extent, cleansed the mindset of the common people. We, in India, came to know about this intellectual revolution only when the British came to power here. On achieving independence, engendering a scientific attitude became the aim of universal education and was included in the Constitution as one of the responsibilities of the Indian citizen. In practice, however, while the latest technologies were utilised for providing creature comforts and conveniences—individual and social—people, both educated and uneducated, neglected the science that drove these technological advances and made no changes to their old ways of thinking and behaving.

Even six decades after independence, there is a ridiculous tendency to ridicule or condemn all that belongs to the West, exalting our own ancient traditions, proclaiming them as essential for eternal bliss. It is heatedly argued that science is not capable of bestowing tranquillity, and what is needed is spirituality. But this so-called spirituality has nothing to do with

sublime humanism; it is a path of illogic, superstition and religious fanaticism. We, who are born in the land of the Buddha, have forgotten Buddha's enlightening stories. One of these stories (the *Jataka Tales* , as they are popularly known) tells us that each one of us is given a key to open the doors of heaven; but the catch is that the same key also opens the doors of hell. Science is one such key; if we go to hell using it, the fault is ours, not that of the key.

What we gain from science is not only the technology that makes human life more and more gratifying, but also an understanding of the properties of non-living matter and the laws of nature. Science helps us increase our self-confidence, become fearless thinkers, develop a broad and positive outlook, and improve the quality of life by sharpening our intellect and sensitivity. This is of utmost importance for human progress. Our society raises to sainthood those who are unremittingly in search of the ultimate truth of human birth; but while we respect the search for truth at a spiritual level, we forget that trying to know the properties of non-living matter is also a search for truth. Scientists like Thomas Alva Edison, who conducted research on electrical energy and invented several gadgets that improved our lives, or the person who invented the mobile phone, or the scientist who discovered the four blood groups—all of these people have striven to discover truth and expended time and energy on it. They too are worthy of our worship. Richard Feynman who was awarded the Nobel Prize for his fundamental research in the field of nuclear power was unhappy that the work of scientists is not appreciated. He felt sad that, while poets eloquently sang the praise of springs, flowers, vales and hills, of love and affection, and of the worship of the Lord, nobody wrote any poems on wonderful truths like the structure of the universe. The study of science, Feynman says, is much more exciting than any piece of literature. The truths hidden in nature are so astonishing that studying nature satiates man's craving for the miraculous and the marvellous.

Knowledge begets power, an important material benefit, but not every form of knowledge can be linked with such gains. Again, it's not possible for everyone to acquire knowledge in every field; yet everyone is capable of developing the keen sight that is essential for it. Nurturing a scientific outlook along with

acquiring knowledge helps develop the capacity to accurately analyse all that takes place in our personal life as well as what happens around us. When one rationally analyses the incidents and events of one's personal as well as social life, one is relieved of the unwarranted fear and mental agony caused by it. Rational analysis will prevent a person from drawing wrong inferences in a given situation.

Today, people are anxious because of the murky social atmosphere of political, religious and cultural terrorism. No doubt we must fight this terrorism, but more serious is the terror that grips the mind. Unlike the terrors forced on us from the outside, mental terror caused by superstition is self-imposed. Strangely, a person living with this terror feels gratified by it. Superstition, refusing to work with reason, fear of god's wrath are all caused by avoiding deep thought and investigating the real cause of things that one is confronted by. To overcome mental terror and to lead a fearless life, it is essential to develop logical thinking and a scientific outlook on life.

The origin of Earth

According to modern science, the age of our Earth is 4.6 billion years. Humans, on the other hand, came into existence less than a million (ten lakh) years ago. Now, if we consider the age of Earth to be one year, then humans have existed here only for the last two-and-a-quarter hours and the period from the emperor Ashoka to this day extends to a mere eighteen seconds!

Different radiations emanate from the atom of the metal called uranium. Eventually, that atom decays into radium. The radium atom further emits radiation and changes into another metal. Through several such changes, finally, uranium decays into a stable metal called lead. This transformation from uranium to lead is a slow, continuous and unvarying process. Any ancient stone that has uranium in it has uranium-generated lead too. The ratio of uranium and lead present in a stone helps estimate its age. The oldest stones on Earth are 3 billion years old, which means that is when the Earth's outer crust began forming. Naturally, the Earth must have come into being before that. The age of the meteors that struck Earth from space is about 4.6 billion years. We can, therefore, conclude that the Earth came

into existence more than 4.6 billion years ago.

Life did not exist when the Earth came into existence. It originated much later. Let us attempt to understand how life began. Life exists on Earth in innumerable forms, from unicellular beings to trees, animals and human beings. All living cells are made of a single substance; that is, protein. It is a very complex compound. Water too is a compound made of two atoms of hydrogen and one atom of oxygen. One atom of sodium and one atom of chlorine combine to form a molecule of sodium chloride (common salt). But a molecule of protein is much, much more complex; it contains millions of atoms. They are very systematically bonded with each other. A protein molecule is mainly made of carbon, hydrogen and oxygen atoms. A peculiar characteristic of living proteins is that they don't remain stable in any one state. They are in constant motion. In this process of life, a part of the live protein becomes useless and is thrown out; and simultaneously, the same live protein absorbs nutrients from its surroundings and assimilates them. Throwing out the unwanted part, obtaining nutrients, restructuring with the help of the new nutrients is a very complex chemical process of metabolism that helps keep the body alive. Thus, life is a special form of protein existence. The process of disintegration and reintegration involves a constant give and take with the external environment. As soon as this give and take stops, life comes to an end and the protein is destroyed. The advances in biology and chemistry of late reveal that nucleic acid plays the main role in reproduction, continuation of hereditary characteristics and the generation of different proteins. So life can be called a unique form of existence, courtesy nucleic acid and protein.

In the process that led to the formation of life, initially a simple compound of hydrogen and carbon—hydrocarbon—and water were formed. Later, hydrocarbon combined with nitrogen, oxygen and water to form simple compounds of four elements. In the third phase, complex compounds like nucleic acid and proteins were formed. In the fourth phase, these substances developed the special characteristics of disintegration and reintegration. In the final phase, this primitive life stuff developed further into primary life forms. From here on begins the history of the evolution of life.

The primitive nucleic acids and proteins that took millions of

years to form after the Earth came into existence were not alive. The real turning point is the step that followed. Absorbing nutrients from the outer environments and assimilating them, simultaneously throwing waste matter out of the body; carrying out these processes continuously and reproducing oneself is the real characteristic of life. To become living matter, non-living matter must acquire these qualities. These life processes appear to be strange and incredible. They are, however, a sum total of many simple chemical processes. Millions of these simple chemical processes keep taking place in a very regular and systematic manner and maintain the life process without pause or interruption. In short, a living organism made of simple protein molecules is an extremely well-organised group of protein molecules. It arranges lakhs of simple chemical processes in an appropriate sequence, and gives them coherence, momentum and direction. All this is not mere speculation. That these processes occur in reality has been proved in the laboratory. Today, scientists are replicating them in a couple of laboratories. Imagine now that crores of these experiments are constantly being carried out in millions of natural laboratories, and that will give us an approximate idea of how life emerged on Earth. Of course, in order to replicate what nature did, we don't need to experiment for millions of years because, out of the innumerable processes that happened in nature, many produced no results. Only a few succeeded in creating life. Today, laboratories do not blindly experiment; we think and reason it out. We choose the particular conditions that have produced results in nature. We avoid all those experiments of nature which failed to produce results. There is no doubt, that our scientists will, very soon, be successful in creating primitive organisms from Earth's early history in the laboratory. That ought to put an end to the dispute over the origin of life on Earth.

All this elaborate discussion boils down to one thing, that the creation of life is not a miracle. Life was created in particular conditions according to nature's laws and wherever such conditions occur, creation of life is possible.

The most primitive organisms must have come into existence about forty million years ago. They were much simpler than the unicellular microscopic organisms without a nucleus, like the bacteria, that exist today. These can be called living matter or

life substance. They lived on the simple carbon compounds that were found dissolved in lake water. But the amount of carbon compounds dissolved in the lake waters was limited, and the organisms continuously turned them into carbon dioxide. Had this continued for long enough, life would have come to a standstill. However, in the course of time, a new energy, a new drive emerged. The organisms, propelled by their need for those carbon compounds, began using light to convert the carbon from carbon dioxide into the food particles they needed. Trees and plants do this still. They absorb carbon dioxide from the air and release oxygen. This ability to produce one's own food with the help of light is a step of utmost importance in the evolution of life. Living organisms must have reached this step about twenty million years ago. The organisms that sustained themselves by through this sort of conversion are now part of the plant kingdom, while those that stuck to the old method of obtaining food particles from their surroundings are in the animal kingdom. The oxygen released into the environment by these plants was very useful for life processes. Earth's environment did not have any pure oxygen. Being a highly reactive element, oxygen quickly reacts with other substances; it is difficult for oxygen to remain in its pure form. Yet our atmosphere contains large amounts of pure oxygen, thanks to these plants. And it is this sequence of events that led to the further evolution of primitive organisms. Multicellular organisms developed from unicellular ones, eventually evolving into the human species.

The ear-splitting claps of rumbling clouds, terrifying lightning, torrential rain, the all-consuming forest fire were all beyond the comprehension of primitive human beings. They, therefore, conceived of these natural phenomena as the five great elements (pancha-mahabhoote) or powerful deities. At every step, they felt they were at the mercy of these deities, and so attempted to appease them and prayed to them in whichever way they thought fit.

In the process of evolution, human beings, the creatures that have emerged most recently, are also the weakest of all animals. Every animal has something special to help them survive, like horns, teeth, claws and hooves. A calf kicks its legs and stands on its own feet as soon as it comes into this world while a human baby, a helpless being at birth, takes three months even to hold

up its own neck. And yet humans rule the world. How could this happen?

Knowledge is the exclusive gift of man. All other animals modified themselves to adjust to the environment. Their bodies made the changes necessary to adapt to their surroundings. But humans changed the environment to suit their own needs. Instead of being controlled, they acquired the ability to control their surroundings. Only humans have an opposable thumb which can touch any of the four fingers of their hands. Humans converted their ten fingers into a tool and began handling the world they lived in. They converted the stones that they could lay their hands on into tools too. In the next stage, humans sharpened their stone devices, tied them to a stick and made an axe. Later, metals were discovered. Metals helped to create a variety of new tools and weapons. Humans were then able to exploit their surroundings more effectively with the help of numerous tools. The whole process resulted in the enhancement of the human brain. A much-evolved larynx and oral cavity helped humans create, cultivate and enrich language. With all these developments, humans not only began amassing vast amounts of knowledge, but were also able to convey it to others. Although humans are animals too, they have distinguished themselves from other animals with their astonishing faculties of cognition and language.

The word science is derived from the Latin word ‘scientia’ which means knowledge. Curiosity to know (in fact, love of knowledge) is what drives the scientist. Science was born out of humankind’s endless curiosity about the universe. Many questions occurred to people: Why is a butterfly so colourful? How many stars can one count with the naked eye? Why does the sun appear to be larger at sunrise and sunset? Why do mosquitoes hum? Human beings are instinctively driven to trace all the processes that take place in the universe and their manifestations; and are overjoyed when this drive bears fruit. Striving for joy is a human instinct. Science progresses because acquiring knowledge begets satisfaction. It is rooted in historically inherited intellect and traditional skills.

Accumulated practical experience and natural talents are passed on from one generation to the next and keep on growing. All this had already been achieved before the advent of modern science.

Modern scientific outlook consists of observation, logical thinking and experiment. In the beginning, it had to face two main difficulties. The first was the lack of reasoning and the right outlook even among talented craftsmen. The second and more important difficulty was that general concepts regarding natural phenomena used to be either vague or prejudiced. The structure of science, with its core of objective experience, is accessible to the human intellect. It is obtained through sense organs. In Europe, before the fifteenth century (that is, before the emergence of the scientific outlook), the opinion of the king or religious authorities decided the truth or falsity of all matters. Science could not progress. Innumerable false concepts regarding nature were entrenched in the minds of people. For instance, the Earth is the centre of the universe, god created man, etc. Science then was based on faith and knowledge contained in the Bible and endorsed by the Church on the one hand, and by the opinions expressed by the most erudite and revered scholar of ancient times, Aristotle, on the other. It had been reduced to intellectual acrobatics. For instance, according to Aristotle, any natural manifestation had two important causes: the efficient cause and the final cause. The efficient cause is akin to the activity of reasoning that we call the search for the cause–effect relationship, and the final cause is the purpose behind the manifestation. Great care was taken to ensure that the purpose was consistent with what was stated in the scriptures. (According to Aristotle, we get the knowledge of objects or phenomena from the four causes related to them. They are: Material Cause, Efficient Cause, Formal Cause and Final Cause.)

The history of all nations has revealed that a society progresses in whichever field it promotes independent thought, observation and experience, and the knowledge based on these. Between the fourth and thirteenth century, independent thought and research were curtailed in Europe and this resulted in the Dark Ages.

Galileo's discovery and research and the concrete proof of it provided by the telescope that he invented threw the European ratiocinating world into turmoil. Galileo strongly supported the

Copernican theory and questioned scriptural testimony; he examined Aristotle's pronouncements, testing them with experiments. The invention of the telescope proved to be a catalyst for further change. Copernicus knew that it was necessary for him to show that Venus too wanes and waxes like the moon to provide evidence for his own theory. But it was not possible to do so till Galileo actually showed proof of it through his telescope. He also showed that there were mountains on the moon and that the sun had dark spots. All this shocked people. The religious powers were mortified. To accept what Galileo showed through his telescopes meant that the work of the creator was imperfect. Even several centuries later, teachers of some Catholic schools were not permitted to make any mention of the sun spots. A religious preacher who pronounced that geometry was the science of Satan and mathematicians were the devil's advocates and ought to be exiled was promoted to a higher rank. Finally, the Christian judiciary held a debate on astronomy and deduced two important inferences based on assertions made in the Bible.

They stated that the scientists' theory that the sun was at the centre and did not revolve round the Earth was utter nonsense. It was devoid of application of mind, and according to scriptures, false. The other theory, that the Earth is not the centre and it revolved round the sun, was philosophically false and denied true faith.

After this debate, the Pope ordered Galileo to appear before the Holy Court—a panel of theologians. The court ordered him to give up his heretical theory. On 26 February 1616, Galileo declared on oath, that he did not accept the thoughts of Copernicus and would not advocate them orally or in writing. Thereafter, he was released.

All books that said the Earth revolves round the sun were blacklisted and banned on the orders of the Pope. But Galileo did not lose hope yet. In 1623, his friend Cardinal Barberini became the Pope—Pope Urban VIII. Feeling somewhat safer, Galileo now wrote a book titled, *The Dialogue Concerning the Two Chief World Systems* . This famous book was widely and eagerly read throughout Europe.

The Holy Congregation began fuming and fretting again. Galileo was forced to keep quiet and a vigorous movement was

launched against him. It denounced his view as malicious and reprehensible. The idea of an unwavering and stable Earth was considered three times holy. The Congregation concluded that arguments against immortality of the soul, the existence of god and his human incarnation could at times be excused, but the argument that the Earth revolves around another body could never be pardoned.

Galileo was now ordered to appear before the Holy Office, a religious court in Rome. His humble plea that he be excused from this arduous journey from Florence to Rome on account of his ill health was not accepted. The Pope, who was once his friend, threatened to send his own physician to examine Galileo, and in case he was found not sick enough, to chain him and bring him to Rome. Reluctantly, Galileo travelled to Rome. There, he was put in judicial custody. He could have even been awarded a death sentence. But mercifully, he was told that if he accepted his mistakes and repented, he would be kept in the judicial custody of the Holy Office, and as a beneficiary punishment, he would have to recite seven prayers of atonement every week from the Holy Scripture for the next three years.

It was clear that the mild punishment would be awarded only on repentance. Galileo, therefore, bent on his knees before the Holy Office and recited the long list compiled by them and said, 'I renounce all the blunders and heretic views; I consider them disgusting and swear that hereafter I will refrain from writing or speaking or maintaining anything that will give rise to any suspicion about me . . .' With his hand on the Bible, he avowed to renounce his own views. The generous Holy Office then reduced his punishment from imprisonment to house arrest, where he was not allowed to meet his family or friends. He became blind in 1637 and died in 1642.

All said and done, what was Galileo's crime that he had to be punished so severely? What every child in primary school today is taught and knows for certain was proved by him experimentally, and yet he had to beg to be pardoned! The reason is that Galileo offered a different cause–effect relationship for the structure of the universe and explained it to people. The reason given in the Bible for the existence of the sun and the moon and their rising and setting was the will of the Father in heaven—the omnipotent god. Galileo proposed an altogether

different explanation. Copernicus had changed the focus of the teachings to how the whole universe works. Galileo endorsed it and gave us, for the first time in history, a new approach towards understanding the world.

This approach involved the following reasoning:

- There invariably is a cause behind every effect. Human intellect can understand that cause.
- We may not be able to discern the cause behind every effect; but we know for sure that we can find out how we can discern those causes.
- This is the most reliable approach to acquiring accurate knowledge.

His thesis offered mankind a different, transparent outlook on the world. Till then, people were given to believe that whatever happened in the life of a human being was caused by god or providence. This power was variously called luck, fate, providence, the accumulated merit or demerit of past lives or destiny. Indian philosophy consolidated all of this in a philosophical theory called 'karmavipak siddhant'. It states that individuals are rewarded in accordance with their deeds. For instance, touching a burning coal is rewarded with a burn. Smelling a fragrant flower will be rewarded with a gratifying fragrance. So, whatever an individual is presently going through must be the fruit of his own deeds of the past; but this connection is obviously not at all perceptible. What we actually observe is that the individual who has not committed any sin or done any bad deed is laid low by penury. Vedic philosophy explains it thus. Whatever the individual has to suffer is the fruit of his bad deeds committed in his previous birth. In one stroke, the karmavipak theory thus enslaves a human being to his past deeds. It is a theory that has been entrenched in the psyche of this country for thousands of years.

But the karmavipak theory utterly contradicts the core of scientific outlook, that is, the theory of causality that gives one the confidence that whatever one faces in life is not caused by god, fate, destiny or the time of one's birth; nor is it the fruit of one's sins of a past life. There is a cause behind one's exploitation, and one can find it and even alter it. For the first

time in history, this confidence stemming from the scientific outlook liberated humans who had so far been slaves of their destiny.

In addition, the scientific outlook has yielded a few more insights. In India, women and Dalits were not allowed to acquire knowledge of causality, or any other knowledge for that matter. The modern scientific outlook tells us that anybody, whatever his or her caste, religion, race, or sex, can discover causal relationships. He or she can understand the causality of the world. This new outlook released the knowledge that was kept under a tight rein of only a privileged few, to all, at least in principle. As a result, the right to education became universal.

Secondly, the oft-repeated and often considered unanswerable question is, 'Does science know everything? Can you tell how cancer is caused or how AIDS can be cured?' Scientific outlook does not claim to know everything. Two hundred years ago, science did not know how plague or cholera was caused; today, it does not know how cancer is caused. However, just as the cause of plague and cholera was discovered through the scientific outlook, the cause of cancer too will be eventually discovered by it. Science does not know everything today, but whenever those things are understood, it will be on account of the scientific outlook alone.

The most reliable way of acquiring exact knowledge today is through a scientific outlook. The testimony of the scriptures, the word (of a divine authority), the vision of the divine, or the transmission of knowledge by a guru are all traditional, and mostly religious, ways of obtaining knowledge; they all refute the scientific outlook vehemently.

Along with causality, uniformity of nature is also a fundamental component of the scientific outlook. It means all phenomena occur according to the same laws anywhere in the universe. Nature is full of diversity. But all this vast diversity is bound by a common set of laws. For instance, under normal circumstances, it won't snow at the equator, while in the polar region all you can see is snow. But the law governing the two phenomena (no trace of snow and nothing but snow) is the same: that is, at what temperature water turns into ice. The same law will apply at the equator, the South Pole and the North Pole. It remains unchanged, even when the place where the phenomena

occur changes. Similarly, the law remains unchanged at different times. The law that decided when water will turn into ice in ancient times applies to the conversion of water into ice even today. Change in place and time does not change the properties of substances. They might appear to behave differently, but the laws that cause the difference remain unchanged.

Scientific outlook: the process

'Believe in things in proportion to the evidence that is provided' is the simple meaning of scientific outlook. We observe this rule in our day-to-day work while making decisions. Suppose the information we need is given to us by four individuals. The first who received it did so in his dream; the second heard it being told to someone by another person, unknown to him; the third person had read about it in books and heard from someone who knew it, while the fourth one has visited the place personally and collected and verified the information. The person who has dreamt about the concerned information will be believed the least and the person who has himself collected the information and also verified it will be believed the most. In short, we believe in proportion to the evidence provided.

Scientific outlook, too, observes the same rule, but more systematically. The method used has several components, namely, observation, reasoning, inference, verification and experimentation. It begins with observation that stems from curiosity and a question that needs to be answered. C.V. Raman travelled to England in an ocean liner. During his long journey, he would sit on the deck watching the infinite blue sky above and the bottomless blue sea below. He attempted to find the truth behind the two similar phenomena—the blue sky and the blue sea. His thoughts produced the theory called the 'Raman Effect' for which he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Physics. Only human beings have the capacity to be curious, have questions that beg answers and observe with purpose. A boa constrictor with prey in its belly, lazily lying under a tree never wonders why the little stars in the sky twinkle. It probably doesn't even see the stars.

It is, however, not possible to indulge in purposeful observation every time we are faced with a question. Then,

recourse is made to logic or experience. There are two well-known examples of this. One is that of the rising sun. If a friend wishes that you go with him for a morning walk to watch the sun rise, you never ask him, 'What is the guarantee that the sun will rise tomorrow?' In one sense, this question is pertinent; yet it is never asked, because the sun has been rising at its appointed hour, every day without fail, for not a year or two but for millions of years. From this observation we can infer that the sun will rise at its usual time the next day too.

Another example: a wayfarer loses his way in the forest in the evening and is unable to decide in which direction he should go. Then he sees that smoke is rising up from about fifteen to twenty spots in a corner of the forest. He knows that people cook their meals in the evenings; they use wood for fuel; every house cooks its own food and smoke comes out of the kitchen. On the basis of all this information, long known, an inference is drawn that there is a human settlement in that corner of the forest, which then turns out to be true.

Scientific outlook needs direct verification. It can never depend on telltale stories. If anybody claims that he has developed a medicine that cures a particular disease, he has to follow a procedure to get that medicine recognised. Firstly, a number of patients suffering from that disease have to be administered appropriate doses of the said medicine and the efficacy of the medicine then needs to be directly verified. The verification has to be objective; a subjective verification is not acceptable. Scientific outlook does not accept an argument along the lines of those who were pious recovered but not those who were not. Moreover, the verification has to be universal. A failure has to be explained scientifically.

Experimentation is the last criterion of verification according to the scientific outlook. We can, through experiments, directly observe that water boils at 100 degrees centigrade. This experimentally proved fact is universal and everlasting. Water boiled at 100 degrees centigrade a million years ago and will boil at the same temperature a million years hence. It will be the same anywhere in the world. It will not boil at 90 degrees in Mumbai because people there are very pious, and at 110 in Moscow where there are many atheists. Again, this can be proved by experiment. When water boils at below or above 100,

the rise or drop in the boiling point is in accordance with another scientific principle, and that principle applies universally at all times.

A scientific hypothesis is proposed on the basis of observation, testing, reasoning, accurate calculations and verification. Experiments are carried out to test the hypothesis in a range of situations. After repeated verifications, the hypothesis is accepted as theory. Consider the theory that all things are attracted towards the Earth because of the Earth's gravitation. Observations show that a fruit from the tree, a feather floating in the air, a leaf severed from the branch, an aeroplane with a failed engine, or a stone thrown up into the sky, all drop down to the Earth, while a balloon filled with gas goes up. All these phenomena are tested and verified through a number of experiments and thus we arrive at the law of gravitation.

Characteristics of the scientific outlook

Scientific outlook means obtaining knowledge through the scientific method. It stresses on the following points:

- It is wrong to blindly believe the words of any kind of authority, including the scripture. The ultimate criterion for truth is direct evidence or observation. The real dispute between religion and science is the testimony of scriptures on the one hand as proffered by religion and direct evidence of experiment and observation as required by science on the other. The new method—direct evidence or observation—has proved so successful in practice that religion has had to compromise with science.
- The universe is bound by distinctive principles which we can understand by experiment, logic and verification. The material world which is the subject of science exists independently outside of human consciousness. It changes according to a definite process determined by certain principles. The existence, orderliness and dynamism of the universe do not emanate from any divine power outside itself. We have to find the source of all this world itself. Humans are part of the world. Their sentience is capable of comprehending the world, and this ability has not been

granted to him by god. It is the nature of their commerce—their conduct and activities.

- The philosophical and religious conviction that the ultimate and the most superior knowledge can be obtained only through divine revelation or through supersensory experiences rejects the scientific outlook. Considering divine revelation as the most superior knowledge also adversely affects democracy. It is said to be a superhuman ability and those human beings who possess, or claim to possess, this ability form a class of their own—the class of those with wisdom and authority as opposed to common people. The common people then have to accept the word of the wise person with authority bestowed on him by tradition. This belief in a traditional authority is inimical to the progress of science.
- The scientist who undertakes an experiment with a scientific outlook has the situation fully under control. He does not believe that any unknown powers can affect the experiment. Moreover, while verifying any scientific truth, if a scientist, in his repeated and carefully controlled experiments or objective observations, comes across even a single exception, the whole edifice of the theory in question tumbles down like a house of cards.
- Science is universal and scientific truths are accessible to everybody. Any interested person can verify it. A scientific truth is not swayed by the opinion of a prestigious individual, because an opinion is subjective and could be based on prejudice.

Scientific outlook and the inculcation of values

The idea of a scientific outlook has entered human life only recently, that is, just about 400 years ago. But it has completely changed the outlook of humans towards the universe. It did not remain a mere mathematical process, but also resulted in the creation of a value-based psyche. Those values are as follows:

Autonomy

A scientific outlook maintains that this universe is bound by

causality and exists autonomously. We can find the underlying causes for all the physical phenomena that occur in this universe. Humans have not yet found the causal relationship of all that happens. For example, we don't yet know for certain why cancer occurs. But when we do discover the reason, it will be because we are looking for a cause–effect relationship. This means that the universe is not governed by any benevolent or malevolent power. So there is no sense in worshipping an imagined benevolent power to curry favour with or to appease the malevolent one with some rituals begging it to withhold its wrath. Ethical values based on the thought that nothing in this autonomous universe can happen in contravention of natural laws draw man away from fatalism and the concept of destiny and encourage the search for causality. Social phenomena, too, are bound by causality, and although it is not as obvious as in physical phenomena, it is necessary to adopt the same approach to find solutions to social problems as we do for physical problems. Looking for solutions in ideas of fate, accumulated merits or demerits of a supposed past life and destiny is a futile exercise.

Investigative attitude

Quite often, we accidentally come across a phenomenon and investigate its causality. The cause–effect relationship thus discovered may even lead to a wonderful invention, as in the case of the invention of Velcro. George de Mestral got the idea of Velcro, the hook and loop, when a piece of chaff got stuck on his trousers. He carefully investigated the causality of this phenomenon and invented Velcro. In days past, separating cottonseeds from cotton was an arduous job and greatly hampered the progress of the textile industry. Elevit, a scientist, once came across an interesting phenomenon. A number of hens were caged in a huge box with vertical bars. A wolf was trying to pull them out with his paws through the bars. But he only managed to pull out feathers, and the hens remained safe inside the cage. He observed the cause–effect relationship in the situation and utilised it to invent a carding machine that revolutionised the textile industry.

The invention of X-rays by Wilhelm Roentgen, Louis

Pasteur's vaccination for cholera, Michael Faraday's laws of magnetic induction and many such examples show how an alert mind that has imbibed the idea of the scientific outlook investigates a situation. This investigative tendency is the soul of the democratic way of life too. In a democracy, elections are held regularly. On such occasions, the promises given by the previous representatives of the people, the work done by them and their conduct are all investigated; or at least are expected to be investigated. The voter should vote on the basis of this kind of investigative intelligence. Democracy and the scientific outlook, in this sense, are complementary and strengthen each other.

Sense of balance

Developing a mind capable of examining all events from every side and drawing inferences from such an exercise is an important aspect of the scientific outlook. It is important to try to understand any problem in its entirety. For instance, the family planning programme was implemented about fifty years ago. Those who have not understood the scientific outlook accuse the government of corruption and people of ignorance, and conclude that this is why the population keeps growing. It is true that the population in India has failed to decrease as expected. But failure of the family planning programme is not the only reason for it. A lot of progress was made in medicine after independence. Life expectancy has increased and so also the number of older people. The maternal mortality rate has decreased and so has the rate of infant mortality within a year of delivery. Naturally, the total population has increased. A balanced view of the situation reveals that the family planning programme has not been a complete failure. It has to be pursued vigorously, and if it is carried out meticulously, the programme will bear fruit in the near future.

Let me narrate a real-life incident to explain the taking of a balanced view of problems. Some years ago, the 10 + 2 system was adopted in our schools, and around the same time, the production of rice in Raigad district suddenly dropped. There is no prima facie relationship between these two developments. But, studying the problem reveals another picture. In the new system, the students of science were required to dissect frogs.

Raigad district, which is something of a 'frogery', exported frogs for dissection and was suddenly deprived of its plentiful population of frogs, which used to eat the bugs that attacked on rice plants in the monsoons. The reduction in the number of frogs meant the loss of a natural pest control system, and consequently, resulted in a lower production of rice.

Humility

The scientific outlook is always humble. Never does it arrogantly lay claim to the last word or assert that its conclusion is the ultimate one. I have understood everything; I have resolved the enigma of the universe; all the knowledge is in my possession, follow me and do my bidding, and so on—these are claims made by religion. The scientific outlook, on the contrary, merely asks one to examine objects or situations, investigate those that are not understood and act only on whatever has been proven true. In science, every hypothesis has to undergo scientific tests and can be done away with if it fails those tests. No religion or its advocates ever show this courage. Scientists are not to be praised for being right, for no one can be certain about it. They deserve acclaim for their genius and for their creative efforts. Despite the invaluable contribution of a number of great scientists, science remains completely objective about their discoveries. Newton was a great scientist, but Einstein pointed to the inadequacy of his theories. However, this is not an affront to Newton. And when a third scientist discovers drawbacks in the theories of both Newton and Einstein, it won't be an insult to them. Anybody can verify the truth of their theories. All scientific theories are open to examination. Science never claims to know everything despite its achievements—great discoveries, inventions and human progress. It is constantly confronted with new questions demanding fresh answers.

The history of Newton's theory of velocity and gravitation is illustrative of this aspect of science. Several decades after Newton's theory of gravitation was proven, astronomers were puzzled because the orbit of the planet Uranus did not tally with the one projected in accordance with Newton's theory. On examination, three alternatives emerged:

1. The theory is wrong.
2. The observation is faulty.
3. The theory and observation are both correct. But a few more things need to be investigated in order to reconcile theory with observation.

The first alternative, that Newton was wrong, was difficult to accept. However, the observations were consistent and could not be faulted. Then John Adams and Urbain Le Verrier came out with an explanation that there must be a new planet near Uranus whose gravitation has caused a change in the orbit of Uranus. Finally, with the aid of various mathematical calculations, this conclusion was proved to be right. The new, hitherto unknown, planet was later discovered and was named Neptune. After a while, another discrepancy was noticed. Several decades of observation revealed a similar discrepancy in the orbit of Mercury. Urbain Le Verrier offered the same explanation again. He claimed that there was a planet named Vulcan, nearer to the sun than Mercury, whose gravitation was affecting Mercury's orbit. But such a planet had not been observed thus far. Many scientists had observed Mercury's orbit for decades and their findings corroborated with each others'. This meant that Newton's theory had to be wrong. But then which other theory was right?

This problem remained unresolved till 1916. In that year, Einstein's Theory of Relativity explained the discrepancy. All of Newton's good work had appeared less momentous because of this small discrepancy. But no one thought it was an insult to Newton. The scientific outlook method mandates that a new theory will retain its standing only until it faces a new puzzle that it fails to resolve.

Fearlessness

The idea of a scientific outlook originated in Europe in the sixteenth century. The development of a method of examination is just one aspect of it. The core lies in challenging established views and opinions with one's own intellect fearlessly and then to be ready to endure with a smiling face all consequent harassment and torture, including death. Actually, it started in

the year 399 BCE , when Socrates was prosecuted in the parliament of the city of Athens. According to the rulers there, what Socrates propounded was heresy. For this, Socrates was sentenced to drink the poison, hemlock. Another option was to renounce his own opinion and leave the state. Socrates quietly drank the cup of hemlock. He had the courage to stand against his own people and all of society and compel them to listen to the voice of his conscience loud and clear. A society that had human beings showing such courage could throw away the chains of superstitious belief and open its doors to science. Socrates was the first to introduce this culture of welcoming death to hold onto one's own views. When this tradition disappeared in Europe, its progress came to a standstill. But then again, about 700 years ago, the continent experienced the dawn of the Renaissance. An onerous struggle of staking one's life in the defence of one's views began.

Roger Bacon (1214–94) in his student days audaciously declared that he would not accept words and theories without verifying them with experiments. He maintained that true knowledge could not be gained from scriptures and blind faith, but only through the exercise of intellect, first-hand experience, contemplation and experimentation. As he was a Franciscan priest, he was not sentenced to death, but was given the comparatively milder punishment of solitary imprisonment in a dungeon for life. This erudite man aspiring to illuminate the world with knowledge had to spend the last twenty-four years of his life in a dungeon. In India, after Charvaka and Buddha, no such efforts to awaken people to the power of thought by staking one's life were made for 2,000 years till the advent of Western knowledge began to influence intellectuals here. Gopal Ganesh Agarkar, the editor of the journal *Sudharak* , had once said, 'Sheer accumulation of knowledge is not enough; knowledge should make the individual courageous in his conduct.' Justice Mahadeo Govind Ranade was a reformer and strongly supported the remarriage of widows and the marriage of older, mature girls. After the demise of his first wife, Mahatma Jyotirao Phule said to Ranade, 'What has happened is sad enough but here is an opportunity for you now to marry a widow or an older unmarried woman.' Justice Ranade agreed with Mahatma Phule, but only at an intellectual level. In practice, he married a young

girl in accordance with tradition, for he could not face the wrath of his family and society. Since then, two new words came into circulation in Maharashtra to denote two strains of reformers: talkative reformers and practising reformers. Of course, one must keep in mind that showing courage in practice is not easy and is possible for only a few. So, those who talk of eradication of superstition, reforming traditional ways and rationalism, but cannot walk the talk, need not be condemned as pretenders. Even voicing these thoughts requires courage and triggers a struggle.

Why did the scientific outlook not take root in India?

During the third and the fourth century, in India, Nagarjuna, the renowned chemist of those days, wrote two books *Rasaratnakara* and *Kalkapura Tantram* . They contained information regarding chemical compounds made from sulphur, mercury, copper, silver and gold, and their use. Varahamihira, the well-known astronomer of India, also belonged to this period. In his book *Brihat Samhita* , he has stated that the sun is a star. He also recorded information regarding other planets. Another writer of the same period meticulously compiled information regarding plants and animals, their characteristics, habits and reproduction. He even tried to classify them. The zero, too, was invented in India. In the books written by Aryabhatta and Bhaskaracharya, important theories in mathematics and astronomy are discussed. However, by the end of the eighth century CE , the investigative urge for knowledge gave way to a tendency of utter obedience and a blind following of elders and authorities. The knowledge of traditional trades, too, was on the wane. But nobody was really perturbed about the deteriorating situation.

The next thousand years or so did produce some exceptionally capable kings. Some important philosophical tomes were also written during this period. However, not a single scientist flourished during this period. The main discourse of this era revolved around the following: with whom should one dine or not dine; should one eat onions in the rainy months of the monsoon called ‘chaturmaas’; should the strip of sandalwood paste drawn on the forehead be vertical or horizontal; how many strands should a sacred thread have; does drinking cow urine

emancipate the soul, and other such senseless and puerile issues. In the empty fuss over worthless rituals, senseless traditions and exploitation of religion, the social psyche of the land lay enervated. This apathetic attitude continues even after independence and can be noticed in the education imparted to Indians. The condition of those millions who are deprived of any education is worse still. But what values and culture are those who do go to school and colleges exposed to? They are taught science, but the teaching lacks critical examination and inquiry. Unscientific concepts, like auspicious time, doing poojas, blessing, god and destiny, incarnation, boon and curse, sin and merit, this world and the one beyond, heaven and hell, prayers and worship, previous birth and rebirth, accumulated sins and merits of previous births and, above all, caste hierarchy are entrenched in the minds and cultural upbringing of our teachers. They transmit these unscientific concepts to their students unwittingly. Students thus learn that Monday is meant for worshipping Shankar, Tuesday for Devi and that Vishnu prefers white flowers while Ganesh is to be offered red ones. The flower of the students' curiosity about scientific truths shrinks with such detailed knowledge of gods and their idiosyncratic likes and dislikes.

Another reason for this stasis is the caste system which is strengthened by vested interests. Earlier, women and Dalits were banned from education. Other castes had the right to acquire and make use of only that knowledge that was pertinent to their caste and its internal dealings. The toiling masses were considered lesser humans. The process of observation–investigation–inference–experimentation that develops scientific outlook was not allowed to operate. The wisdom that the so-called knowledgeable people had was obtained traditionally from scriptures and from those in authority, and therefore not open to logical scrutiny. The caste system itself was based on a most illogical presumption of superiority or inferiority decided on the basis of which family the individual was born into. In such a society, it was impossible to develop a scientific outlook. The philosophy in this country was: Brahma is satya and jagat is maya, that is, the material world we see and experience every moment, the joy or grief that emanates from it, is all illusion and therefore worthless. This is deeply rooted in our social psyche.

We were told that Brahma is our real being and existence, no clue about what this Brahma is. Aham brahmasmi became our guideline. The parabrahma of the universe—the universal soul or the soul that pervades the universe (whatever that means)—and the brahma and the soul in me are very closely related and their reunion means emancipation: the ultimate goal of life. No wonder, our thought process remained devoid of the scientific outlook.

The third reason is our unchanging system of education, wherein we are not taught to ask why. Asking a question is considered insolence and an affront to the teacher. Curiosity is discouraged. The questions why and why so are of utmost importance for any learning. Children's minds burst with innumerable doubts. They observe their surroundings with curiosity and question why things happen the way they do. Their teachers respond with, 'Shut up, and remain still like an idol (of a deity)!' The god of this culture teaches human beings to shut up. This wide-eyed, inquisitive tendency of the students alone can build the future of the nation. But to inculcate this attitude, it is necessary that first and foremost the child should get education—30 per cent of our children do not go to school at all and only 8 to 9 per cent enter college. So lack of education and the repression of curiosity in whatever little education we have is one more reason why the scientific outlook does not take root in our society.

The fourth reason is our family system. An individual grows in the family and his mother and father are the most important partners in his growth till he becomes independent of them. But the atmosphere in our families is autocratic. All decisions are made by the father. The mother and others wait on the father to decide not only on critical and important matters but even trivial ones. We tend to equate autocracy with discipline, and open-minded discussion with confusion and disorder. A friendly and amicable family atmosphere, where all the members of the family are welcome to participate, will have to be intentionally created. There is a saying in Sanskrit that even a child utters insightful words. Even the youngest member of the family should get a chance to voice his opinion and his advice, if useful, should be considered. Families where such discussions take place will be enriched and strengthened.

The fifth reason is the deification of individuals. In our society, at present, self-respect has been displaced by vanity, pride and egotism, and criticism is deemed to be a deliberate belittling of the concerned individual or his thoughts. Society these days has become oversensitive to any criticism of religion. Everybody has his own distinct deity. To avoid controversy, therefore, any critical examination of individual or other issues involving faith is avoided. Wherever individuals, thoughts, incidents get deified, the scientific outlook has no chance of developing.

One important reason is the absence or lack of political will on the part of those who are in power and want to reform the social system in accordance with their progressive thinking. If the progressive forces that are actively involved in evaluating and then reforming social life at all levels are strong and effective, then the scientific outlook can spread quickly. But religion, customs and traditions have already become so sanctimonious, sacrosanct and potent that even if the custom is senseless and the tradition involves exploitation, the social psyche does not like or allow that custom or tradition to be critically examined. The celebration of the festival of Holi that destroys wood and good food and sanctions the shouting of obscene abuses at women will not have, otherwise, continued into modern times. Our society still remains in the tight grip of such untoward customs and traditions. It keeps us from developing a scientific outlook. Moreover, reactionary forces want to gain political mileage by pandering to people's adherence to customs and traditions; and seats of faith grow from strength to strength and make the propagation of the scientific outlook all the more difficult.

Religious life and the scientific outlook

In India, religious life is not considered to be separate from spiritual life. Religion may appear to be full of rites and rituals, but howsoever formal it may appear, its core is spiritual. The word 'religion' (dharma) generally indicates Hinduism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Jainism, etc. All these organised religions have three major components.

- Religious notions: Every religion espouses notions like faith, sacred book(s), the founder of the religion or a prophet.
- Religious practice: Every religion has sacred rites and ceremonies, observations, festivals, rituals, temples, holy places, etc.
- With the help of these two components, every religion promises to bring about a radical moral reform in the minds of its followers.
- The religious state thus obtained is called divine manifestation, manifestation of self (atma), liberation, or emancipation.

Notions of the scientific outlook

- Scientific derivations are conceptual theories. Whenever new evidence is gained, these theories have to be changed, or at times, even discarded. Human knowledge remains ever incomplete, and therefore, always changeable. There is no ultimate truth.
- It accepts derivations and concepts that are validated by developed scientific method, which is based on experience obtained from observation and experiments.
- Any scientific theory should be falsifiable on the basis of the occurrence of some phenomena not previously accounted for. A theory that can never be falsified cannot be called a scientific theory.
- Any theory that is validated based on an individual's word or the 'book' cannot be accepted. It can be accepted only on the basis of experience-based evidence and logical reasoning.
- Facts and phenomena ought to be studied with complete objectivity, selflessness and neutrality. Human feelings—hope and fear, desire and prejudice—should not be allowed to interfere with the search for truth.

Scientific outlook in the twenty-first century

The scientific outlook has brought about unprecedented progress and growth in the knowledge of the material world in the

nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In the twenty-first century, it is expected to perform similarly in the field of the social and psychological sciences. In 1953, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru presented the National Science Policy in parliament. He spoke of the extraordinary importance of science in our life thus: 'Scientific temperament is a process of thinking, method of action, search of truth, way of life, spirit of a freeman.'

The scientific outlook is a method of thought and action and a way of pursuing the truth. It provides direction to the life of an individual who can then have a conscience free of inhibitions. We have already discussed how the scientific outlook is thought- and action-oriented. Here we will discuss how it proves effective in searching for the truth and deciding the course of one's life.

In the dynamic society of today, time is of utmost importance; it is more important than money. And yet, even today, on the tenth day of the demise of a person the pindadan ceremony (offering of rice balls to crows) is performed. Relatives and acquaintances gather in the crematorium, spending innumerable hours reaching there. And over and above that, they spend more time waiting for a crow to touch the rice balls. The rationale proffered is that the soul of the dead comes near the rice balls on the tenth day when the ceremony starts. The crow then sees the soul! Not only this—the crow sees the dead person's face and perceives whether the person is happy or not! If the person is happy, the crow touches the pinda (rice ball) immediately. However, if the dead person is unhappy, the crow does not touch it. This indicates to the relatives of the dead person that he or she is sad. The relatives then in their own wisdom proceed to investigate the cause of the sorrow, if any. They vow to take action to eliminate that cause. For instance, they vow that a grown-up daughter of the deceased will soon be married off, or they vow that no stone will be left unturned in finding the dead man's unemployed son a job soon. After all this, the satisfied relatives return home. But there is no trace of any search for truth in this whole narrative. There is not even the awareness that the crow's touching the rice ball is directly related to whether the crow is hungry or not. Whatever is accepted as truth is as stated by religious decree, and therefore, beyond any investigation whatsoever.

With a scientific outlook, this state of affairs could change; it

could even decide the course of our social life. Having a scientific outlook ripens human comprehension. Most of our social problems are the result of a lack of mature comprehension. If, by engendering the scientific outlook in a democracy, the common man acquires maturity in comprehending problems, it will enable him to take appropriate decisions. We are told that by the year 2020, India will become a great power. But the nature of this power as envisaged by most people is: an Indian will set foot on the moon; India will be among the first few nations to have a well-developed human resource base in science and technology; or India will be ready to protect herself with the most modern weaponry.

But a different question needs answering now. In the Human Development Index (HDI) India ranks 127th (in the year 2004) in the world. This index is based on literacy, infant mortality, deaths during delivery, provision of drinking water for all and other such facilities. On thinking about these two issues, a thought comes to mind: when India has the advanced technology to send an astronaut to the moon, why can she not prevent the deaths of young women during pregnancy and delivery, and why does she find it so difficult to provide drinking water so rural women do not have to trudge for miles and miles to collect water? If the common people imbibe a scientific outlook, comprehend problems and decide their priorities, then the priorities of development before the nation too will change. Such awareness of social problems can and should be created through the adoption of a scientific outlook in the twenty-first century.

Liberating the human conscience and offering support to sustain its freedom is the most important task of the scientific outlook. The very meaning of being human is to possess a conscience and a clear, unhindered conscience. The social system too shapes this conscience. But even under the pressure of material circumstances, an individual can liberate his own conscience. This is a special human characteristic. Dr Ambedkar had said in this regard, ‘Make the slave conscious of his slavery and he will rebel.’ He also advocated a revolution of the mind prior to a political revolution. Along with systemic change, an unhindered conscience that can resist any kind of pressure is necessary for liberation from the mental slavery that results from political oppression, economic exploitation and many other ills.

The scientific outlook has a major role to play here; it is the core of the freedom of conscience and, therefore, is of utmost value for a human being.

An important component of the idea of free conscience is attaining freedom from carnal desires as well as enrichment by nourishing feelings like mercy, forgiveness, sympathy and tranquillity. Man has been in search of this tranquillity for thousands of years, long before the idea of a scientific outlook developed. All the human beings whom we honour as saints or noble men tried to find a path, in their own way, to reach this stage. Religions and sects adopted this lengthy path and endorsed it with their seal. There are many approved ways of achieving this state of mercy and forgiveness, sympathy and tranquillity, but their effectiveness is doubtful. Moreover, those who follow the path of enlightenment do not utter a word about changing the exploitative system. In the twenty-first century, the fields of psychology and psychiatry, with the help of scientific outlook, are expected to discover this path. In this sense, the march of the scientific outlook in the twenty-first century is a march towards the emancipation of humankind.

Objections to the idea of the scientific outlook and responses

Knowingly or unknowingly, some people have spread the prejudice that a science-based lifestyle means blunt outspokenness devoid of emotions. Emotions form a rich and essential side of the human personality. What the scientific outlook opposes is forfeiting reason and letting emotions loose. A person might naturally feel miserable when a close relative passes away. For a while, his mind is bound to feel rudderless and he feels a vacuum in his life. All of this is natural. A rational man, too, experiences all of this, but accepts the inevitable and turns to his daily routine of work. On the other hand, if a bereaved person remains gloomy and inconsolable for months and years, and attempts through manias like planchette (calling on spirits) to establish contact with the soul of the dead, it is not a matter of sentiment; it is plain irrationality.

Many people harbour a kind of malice against science. Some people think that confronting all the problems of life without

faith in god is sheer arrogance while others think it is idiocy. Those who need support of the god-concept have the right to seek it, as has been stipulated in our Constitution. But wisdom lies not in surrendering to any conceptual power, but in comprehending the nature of the difficulty, admitting the mistakes inadvertently made, learning from them and squarely facing the situation.

Another avowal against science is that despite all the innumerable discoveries and inventions made, or that might be made in future by man, he is certainly not going to achieve victory over nature. The scientific outlook strives to understand natural laws and utilise that knowledge to make human life happy. In the rainy season, the river is flooded; its water inundates the surroundings and destroys life. The same river dries up in the summer and again devastates life. If such a river is dammed and the flood waters are controlled, water would be available throughout the year and electricity can also be generated. All this becomes possible when human beings discover the laws that govern nature's activities. The scientific outlook does not aim to conquer nature; it aims to understand nature and its laws, and use them for the benefit of human beings. It seeks coexistence with nature.

Another argument blames science for making the atom bomb that killed lakhs of people. Science cannot make man happy. In this argument, what is conveniently forgotten is the contribution of science in making human life safe and satisfying. The production of food has increased manifold to the point of being able to feed the whole of humanity only because of science. Many epidemics and pandemics that once killed millions have now been banished or controlled. Media communications have undergone an unprecedented revolution and now provide varied, large-scale entertainment. What was thought to be impossible to achieve in the whole of human history has already been achieved in the last two centuries by science. Whether to use fire to cook food or to set the neighbour's house on fire is a decision that relies on discretion and the ability to discriminate between right and wrong. The wisdom developed by a scientific outlook may not create the ability to make the right decision. Religion, they claim, can develop wisdom. Of course, those who wish to pursue the path of religion are free to do so. But the most reliable path

to wisdom is also through the scientific outlook. In addition to the value of wisdom and rational thinking, the revolution wrought by science in human life remains unparalleled, for it stands on a concrete platform of reality that is secular.

The scientific outlook is accused of not attempting to answer every question. For example, it makes no comment on god or the soul. This accusation arises out of ignorance regarding the meaning of the scientific outlook. The soul, god and concepts of that sort are beyond human observation and experiment. Hence, the scientific outlook simply admits that it does not know. It does not believe that the knowledge that is beyond human observation and experiment can be comprehended by humans. Even the charge that common people are not able to adopt the scientific outlook, because they need the support of religion is not right. In many areas of everyday life, common people do use the scientific outlook when making decisions. They believe things to the extent that those things are proven to be true. In comparison to this, genuine religious ethics is very difficult to practise. The scientific outlook believes that rational thinking can generate moral behaviour. So the allegation that the scientific outlook does not generate values has to be rejected. The champions of religion maintain that religion is not tradition, rituals and customs; its base is philosophy and morality, and so religion engenders moral values. The scientific outlook, too, is not just mathematical calculations. It deals with causality. Towards the inculcation of values, causality recommends this: We should not do unto others what we do not want others to do unto us, and we should do unto others what we want others to do unto us. The scientific outlook gives proper direction to our thoughts, which may or may not reflect in the action of individuals. However, the possibility that a person will arrive at the proper direction to action is the highest in case of the scientific outlook because it is derived from the human intellect —just as values, are. Values are derived from social circumstances too. However, social circumstances can be examined for the inculcation of values with the help of the human intellect alone. This sequence—scientific outlook–thinking–values–intellect–social circumstances—reveals how baseless the charge that the scientific outlook neglects values is.

Once a scientific outlook is adopted, things like magnetic

therapy, Reiki, vastushastra and astrology become unacceptable. Similarly, the so-called existence of moksha, brahma, parabrahma, heaven, soul, universal soul and such concepts, too become unacceptable.

2

A Scientific Test of Astrology

The stars in the sky, twinkling from such a vast distance, were very attractive to primitive human beings. The regular movement of the stars in the sky in their set orbit day after day and year after year without fail fascinated them; as compared to the stars, the human being's life on Earth was insecure and irregular. Human beings have been observing the stars since time immemorial. As early as 4200 BCE , the Babylonians had started to make notes on the movements of the stars and planets. Their observations, born out of curiosity, revealed many important phenomena, such as the change in seasons according to the change in the sun's position in the sky; high and low tides according to the moon's waxing and waning; eclipses of the sun and moon and determining directions with the help of the positions of stars. After observing and making notes for hundreds of years, these record keepers were able to draw some inferences. On the basis of these inferences, they could foretell the full moon and no-moon days; predict eclipses and their timings; they could predict the appearance of a comet and the appearance of those stars that indicated a change of season. In ancient Egypt, astrologers were able to forecast, after the appearance of certain stars in the sky, when it would rain and advise people when the Nile would spread alluvial soil on its banks so that farmers could start sowing. Later, the knowledge of constellations and the cycle of seasons was utilised for agriculture and that of stars to indicate direction to night-time travellers. This led to the argument that since the terrestrial phenomena are related to the sun and the moon and the stars, the latter must affect human life too. In the beginning, astronomy, mathematics and astrology together formed one composite science. Gradually, however, as

science flourished in human culture, mathematics became an independent discipline. In the sixteenth century, astronomy, too, became an independent subject for investigation. Thereafter, whatever these two eminent sciences discarded as worthless remained as astrology. However, by then, some forecasters had developed a vested interest in astrology. They had succeeded in providing succour to the weak human mind. This human need is what has helped astrology to survive.

The argument that all people, educated and uneducated, resort to astrology for help and solace, and therefore it must hold some truths, is irrational. Many people do many things. But that does not mean their actions are right or scientific. The criteria for whether a certain thing is scientific and rational are identical everywhere in the world. Astrology will be recognised as a science only when it fulfils all those criteria. At present, it is far from being a science.

We are told that the Indian tradition of astrology is as old as that of the Vedas. However, in the sections on vedang jyotish (one of the six sciences considered as part of the Vedas) of both the Rigveda and Yajurveda, there is not even a mention of phalajyotish, that is astrology. Nevertheless, the idea that the stars and planets determine the past and the future of human beings fits in quite well with the Hindu theory of karmavipak, prarabdha, vidhilikhit and poorvasanchit (broadly, these terms mean destiny; see Chapter 8 for a further discussion). The Hindu mind, therefore, readily accepted phalajyotish or astrology. And that is no evidence to elevate astrology to the level of science.

It is wrong to claim that astrology is a science just because it has survived for thousands of years, or because great sages wrote huge tomes on it. For thousands of years, human beings had a number of misconceptions. The Earth is flat, the sun revolves round the Earth from east to west, earthquakes are caused when the huge serpent called Sheshnag shakes his head, the demons Rahu and Ketu swallow the sun and the moon and cause eclipses, a pregnant woman should not cut vegetables during an eclipse lest her child is born with cleft lips, performing a yagna brings rain and prosperity—the list is quite long. But as science advanced, these misconceptions faded away. *Bhrigu Samhita* , an ancient tome, is proffered as evidence of the divine knowledge of astrology. It is claimed that our omniscient rishis, who could

witness everything, be it the past, present or the future, wrote this book. They predicted the future of everyone born from the time that human beings came into existence and of all those who will be born right until the end of the world. The claim that those rishis intuitively knew what passes in the world has little truth in it. No science can be developed from intuition; the edifice of science is the sound and systematic study of natural phenomena and human experience.

People try various methods to forecast the future: using a parrot to forecast the future; crystal-gazing; looking through lampblack; looking through a rudraksha (the berry of a sacred tree); ramal vidya (using figures and lines and dice); using numbers; chiromancy; palmistry; horoscope-reading or astrology; *Bhrigu Samhita* or *Nadi Granth* , etc.

These and other techniques of fortune telling have nothing to do with the scientific method. But the moment anyone states this, the astrologers are up in arms. They argue: 'We accept the diagnosis of a physician because he is systematically trained for it. A layman who is not trained and does not know anything about medicine should not make any comments on his diagnosis. Likewise, those who have not studied astrology and therefore are ignorant about it have no right to comment on or raise objections to it.' Prima facie this argument appears quite reasonable, but in reality it is not. The argument cunningly misguides us.

Karani and mooth maarane (doing evil through incantation or magic), sorcery, witchcraft, bhanamati and the like are all superstitions. In the Maharashtra Assembly, a bill has been passed to ban superstitions that are exploitative and dangerous to life. Nobody can claim that all these are matters of black magic and those who do not study black magic have no right to oppose them or insist on a law to prevent them. The laws of science and black magic are mutually conflicting and have nothing in common with each other. The case of astrology is no different. The so-called science of astrology that claims a brilliant tradition of 2,000 years has not been able to spell out any universally acceptable law that would stand a scientific test.

Astrology: Three hypotheses

To prove anything scientifically, formulating a hypothesis is a

must. Next, the hypothesis needs to be proven by observation, examination, rigorous logic, mathematics, direct experience and experiment. Those who claim that astrology is a science have so far failed to produce any such hypothesis, which rules out the possibility of examination. It follows then that the whole practice of astrology depends on some unproven hypothesis. And astrologers, too, admit that the whole edifice of astrology rests on a theory that can be spelt out as below:

> The stars and planets in the sky constantly influence human life. This influence depends on the time of birth of an individual. That determines an individual's future which is comprehensible and can at times be changed. (Hypothesis One)

Even a little investigation reveals the hollowness of this postulation, which is the basis of the whole edifice of astrology.

There is a lot of discrepancy and ambiguity in astrology while determining which planets affect human life. Many hundreds of thousands of stars and a few planets in our solar system have no place whatsoever in the horoscope.

Including all of them, of course, is not practicable. Secondly, astrologers of old, when astrology was developed, had no inkling of how vast the expanse of the universe was. Our Earth exists in the solar system and the astrologers of the olden days considered only this system, which is quite reasonable and understandable. This is how the present astrologers justify the exclusion of thousands of stars. Let us grant this to them; but there is lot of confusion even in how they consider the planets of the solar system. They have no idea about the enormity of these planets nor do they know how vast the distance between them and the Earth is.

The 'planets' that are used to make a horoscope are the sun, the moon, Mars, Mercury, Jupiter, Venus, Saturn, Rahu and Ketu. The planets Uranus, Neptune and Pluto found no mention in the horoscopes that were made 150 years ago because they had not been discovered then. But they ought to have known of the existence of these other bodies since they call themselves 'makers of the science of astrology'. Now let us look at the status of those celestial bodies called planets in the horoscopes. The sun is, in

fact, a star. The moon is a satellite of the Earth. Rahu and Ketu don't even exist. The two points where the orbit of the moon crosses the Earth's orbit are named Rahu and Ketu. Astrologers of the old visualised Rahu and Ketu as big boa constrictors or demons that swallow the sun and the moon and cause eclipses. (Like Rahu and Ketu, astrologers from the south of India consider one more imaginary planet called Mandi in their horoscope, while Western astrologers completely ignore these three imaginary planets.) The moon, the lone satellite of the Earth, finds a place in the horoscopes, but not a single satellite of Jupiter is considered, although so far sixty-three have been discovered and many of them are two-and-a-half times as large as the moon. Altogether, four out of nine entities that form the horoscope are conceived erroneously, which amounts to 44 per cent of the total assumptions.

The question, 'Which planet of our solar system is the most menacing to human beings?' is invariably answered by a Maharashtrian (perhaps all Indian Hindus) as Saturn (Shani). Such is their dread of it. In fact, the one planet that is capable of being dangerous to affects human beings is our Earth. All the pleasures and pains of a human life are bound to this planet. Yet the Earth has no place in a horoscope! The reason offered by astrologers for this lapse is that the Earth is at the centre of the solar system. Thus they refute in one stroke, all the progress made from Copernicus to date in the field of astronomy!

How can one prove that something is scientific? The simple rule to determine this is that it should be possible to examine the effectiveness of that entity independently with the scientific outlook. For example, let us examine the contention that a particular disease can be cured by a certain decoction of medicinal herbs. Let us assume that this decoction is made of ingredients from ten different plants. Naturally, the recovery from the disease is due to the combined effect of all ten plants. But this alone does not reveal which of the ten plants works on which symptoms of the disease. To investigate this, we will have to make ten different decoctions and observe which plant affects which symptom of the disease and how. This alone can give us a precise analysis of the decoction. Astrology, too, believes that all the planets of the solar system produce a combined and continuous effect on human life. Yet, while predicting the future

of a person, the astrologer tells him the effect of each planet separately, such as the effect of Mars or Saturn or Jupiter during a particular period. Knowing the effect of each planet separately is like observing the effect of each plant in the decoction in the above example. It is possible to examine the effect of every plant in the decoction separately. But to examine the effect of one planet, it is not possible to stop the impact of all the other planets during that period. The characteristics assigned to each planet, therefore, have no basis in independent observation.

One important criterion of science is that the scientific outlook begins to operate right from the initial stage of observation. Observation over a certain period, made in identical situations, produces a body of records. These records constitute the foundation on which the structure of science rests. The fundamental drawback of astrology is that no such basic observations are possible in it. Suppose a certain tree bears fruit once a year or once every alternate year. It is possible to observe and make notes about it. But if it bears fruit once in a hundred years, observation is more difficult, but not impossible. When, however, it is claimed that the tree bears fruit once every one lakh years, no continuous observation, which is necessary for developing the science on this particular tree, can be made available. What about when observations of the Earth and other planets of the solar system and constellations are to be made? For continuous observation, identical situations should occur repeatedly. Let us, for the moment, accept that the planets of the solar system affect human life. In that case all the stars in the Milky Way and all the other galaxies in the universe must affect our life too.

Today, science has revealed that there is an immensely huge distance and empty space between the planets of the solar system, and indeed, between constellations. The distance is generally mentioned in terms of light years so that it can be denoted by a small number. But the measure is the speed of light which is 0.3 million kilometres (3 lakh kilometres) per second. The Milky Way, the galaxy in which our solar system is included, contains 200 billion stars bigger and brighter than the sun. And there are at least a 100 million such galaxies in the universe. All these heavenly bodies are constantly on the move. This means that the state of this unfathomable universe at a particular

moment will take an infinite amount of time to repeat itself once again. No observation is possible in such a situation and equally impossible is the formulation of astrology that relies on the state of the stars and planets in space.

When humans discovered astrology, they divided observable celestial space into twelve parts; specific traits were attributed to the planets, stars, constellations and zodiac signs that fell in each of these twelve parts. This fantastic exercise of dividing the space around Earth into twelve permanent divisions, and allotting specific characteristics to them is a big joke. We know that Earth revolves round the sun at the speed of 108,000 kilometres an hour. Naturally, the space and the stars that surround us change as the Earth moves. To allot a specific attribute to any part of this space is baseless, and nobody has ever produced any evidence to support it.

The sun appears to move round the Earth like a water-wheel on a well. This apparent passage of the sun is called ecliptic and the girdle extending 7.5 degrees north and south of it is an ecliptic belt. Ancient Indian astrology divides this belt into twenty-seven constellations. Later, each zodiac was allotted two-and-a-half constellations. The constellations too are supposed to evince certain traits. Constellations belong to one of the three divisions—Manushya (human), Rakshas (demon) and Dev (deities). They are also of masculine, feminine and neuter genders. Some are supposed to be thieves, some are cruel and others righteous. They also consist of the elements fire, air, water or earth. The individual is affected by (that is, acquires the characteristics of) the constellation in which the moon happens to be at the time of his birth. A person born in a feminine constellation will have feminine characteristics irrespective of his gender.

Later, the twenty-seven constellations were divided into twelve zodiacs. Each zodiac then should have been allotted the same attributes as possessed by the constellations included in it. But that is not so. The zodiacs have characteristics of their own. This has further compounded the existing confusion. So does a person born under a certain constellation have the characteristics of it or of the zodiac to which he belongs? For example, Magha, Poorva and Uttara are feminine constellations, but the zodiac to which they belong is Simha (lion) a masculine one. How can

three feminine components make one masculine whole? Similarly, two feminine constellations, Chitra and Swati, together with a neuter Vishakha form a masculine zodiac, Tula. To top it all, the three neuter-gendered constellations—Vishakha, Anuradha and Jeshtha—form a feminine zodiac, Vrishchik. How is that possible?

The elements of the rashi-nakshatra (zodiac-constellation) are similarly shrouded in confusion. As already mentioned, fire, air, water and earth are the four elements. The zodiac Kumbha of the element air is formed by Dhanishtha of the earth element, Shatataraka of the water element and Poorvabhadrapada of the fire element. This means air (Kumbha) = earth (Dhanishtha) + water (Shatataraka) + fire (Poorvabhadrapada). Similarly, Dhanu, the zodiac of the fire element, is made up of Mool (water), Poorvashadha (water) and Uttara (earth). This means that two water elements with one earth element make up fire. On what grounds did these shallow-witted astrologers devise such interpretations? In short, the characteristics ascribed to the rashi-nakshatras (zodiac-constellations) are completely meaningless.

All the constellations have a prominent star as a referent, so we have some ground to acknowledge their existence. Even the existence of the zodiac, even if it is imaginary, can be acknowledged, because of their reference to the constellations. But what can be said about bhavachakra—the circle on which are traced the twelve signs of the zodiac, showing the twelve points of consultation in the horoscope. These twelve bhavas do not exist anywhere in space. It is said that they are momentarily impressed in the sky at the time of birth. At the moment of birth and at the spot where it takes place, the tenth bhava is impressed in the sky above the baby's head, the first bhava on the eastern horizon and the rest in association with these two. Now, every second, four babies are born in the world, on an average. So, different bhavachakras get impressed in the sky every second. This means that in any one part of space, baby A has its first bhava while baby B may have its fifth bhava and baby C some other bhava. So their different bhavas overlap with each other. Now, astrology believes that the impact that planets have on human life change according to the bhava that happens to be in its range. The same planet, therefore, simultaneously happens to be in different bhavas—a completely illogical proposition. So the

assumption that a planet affects babies born at the same moment differently in accordance with their different bhavas is scientifically impossible.

The time of birth (Hypothesis Two)

The time of a baby's birth is of utmost importance to her parents because the positions of the planets change constantly. Astrologers, and parents who have faith in them, believe that this determines her whole life. In the days of yore when there were no clocks, astrologers had a very convenient excuse for wrong prediction—a mistake in noting the time of birth. But today, the time of birth is noted with precision with the help of modern clocks. Yet astrologers continue to absolve themselves in the case of wrong predictions claiming that the time of birth is incorrect. In addition, there is heterodoxy in various books on astrology regarding the importance of the time of birth. In astrologers' seminars, heated discussions take place on this issue. There is no consensus so far on what exactly should be considered as the time of birth; and, needless to say, no scientific support is given for any assumption. Consider this example of irrationality. A few years ago, twin girls were born in the hospital of a much-reputed gynaecologist of Mumbai. Before the second baby girl was taken out of the womb, the moon entered another constellation, resulting in different skin colours of the babies, the eminent gynaecologist claimed. Now, it is well known that the shape, structure, colour of the skin and such other characteristics are determined by genes and chromosomes. So, a change in the constellation at the time of birth cannot, in any way, change the skin colour of the baby. Twins are either uniovular or biovular. The twins in the above case obviously were of the latter type. About a century and a half ago, Mahatma Jyotiba Phule had asked astrologers how they determined the time of birth. His explanation of this problem may have been simple and lacking in flourishes, but his basic thought was sound.

Determinist forecast (Hypothesis Three)

The third part of the hypothesis that aims to obtain recognition for astrology as a science is that it can indicate the course of a person's future life with the help of a horoscope. There are three

types of claims in this regard. The first is that it interprets the signs of destiny. Like a train that runs on rails, an individual's life runs on the rails of destiny which he cannot change. But the horoscope, like a signal, warns him of possible danger (or success) in advance so that he can prepare to face the future better. This whole scheme converts an individual into a puppet at the hands of destiny. It nips in the bud any possibility that a person could bring about a change in his life and in society on his own, making him a helpless dependent. The horoscope engenders an unscientific concept. Take, for example, women's literacy. During the last 2,000 years, the horoscopes of women in this country did not reveal any opportunity for education. But in the last hundred years, due to the efforts of Savitribai Phule and other social reformers, opportunities for the education of women in all fields have opened up. Do their horoscopes show signs of education now which were absent then? Before independence, the average life of an Indian was thirty years. The efforts of the last sixty-five years have raised it to an average of sixty years. Does it mean that the configuration of the planets causing death has shifted in the horoscopes of all Indians to increase their life expectancy?

Another assertion of astrology is that the planets in the horoscopes do not just indicate what is in store in the future, they even manipulate life. The valve in the water tank is a good simile. Like water in the tank of fate, there is the prarabdha of the individual. (Prarabdha is the merit and demerit of earlier lives which determines the present birth and regulates the allotment of good and evil. Also see Chapter 3 on vastushastra.) Just like the valve that regulates water supply by providing water at the appropriate time and in the right proportion, planets release the fruits of the prarabdha. The third assertion goes one step further and states that the planets virtually control the lives of individuals. What happens and when and how it happens in the life of an individual are all determined by the influence of the planets. This third part of the astrology hypothesis offers a defeatist and fatalistic philosophy. An individual receives genes and chromosomes from his parents. His progress in life depends on the social and familial conditions in which he is brought up. But the so-called science of astrology ignores all these sides of life.

Other arguments that prove that astrology is not a science

- Astrology believes that the rays emanating from the planets affect the foetus at the time of delivery. In effect, what we are being told is that these rays travel through the vast distance of space to the Earth's surface, then through the impenetrable slab of the cement concrete of the hospital into the delivery room, but have to wait to exercise their power till the baby comes out. They cannot penetrate through the few centimetres of the mother's belly and the walls of her womb! Is there any logic to this argument?
- In the Antarctic region, nights and days last for six months at a stretch. These days, scientists have a few small bases there. In the future, more people will live there. If a woman delivers during the night there, how will an astrologer make the baby's horoscope? Many people live in the polar region and, naturally, babies are born to them. For example, in Murmansk, a big city in Russia, for months the sun is not visible. How then can one prepare horoscopes of the people living there? Humankind has already set foot on the moon. People will settle in lunar colonies in the near future. When a woman delivers a baby there, where will the astrologer place the moon in her horoscope? But such questions just do not occur to astrologers.
- There is one more pet argument of those who believe in astrology. It runs thus: the sea is in high tide on a full moon day and in low tide on a new moon day. The moon being an agent of the mind, changes occur in people's minds on full moon and new moon days. The mind is agitated. Murders, rapes and robberies increase. Like the Earth, the human body too, consists of 80 per cent water. Hence, the moon affects the human body like it affects the water bodies on this planet. A profound scientific statement stapled to the argument! The reality here is that high tides and low tides are caused by the force of gravity. The theory of gravitation tells us that the gravitational force between two objects is in direct proportion to the mass of those objects and in inverse proportion to the

squared distance between them. The mass of the oceans is enormous, hence it rises up. But if a bowl of the same sea water is kept on the shore, the pull of the moon's gravitational force acting on it will be negligible because of its tiny mass. Even granting this negligible gravitational effect, in any case, it should not vary from person to person according to their zodiac signs.

How can the place of the moon in the horoscope affect people differently in accordance with their zodiac signs? Comparing the water content of the Earth and that of the human body, and pointing out that the percentage in both is the same is simply ridiculous and extremely unscientific. It is like comparing an elephant with a mouse and stating that both have four legs, a tail and dark skin. So an elephant is a mouse, QED! The other claim that on full moon and new moon days, rapes, murders, robberies and other crimes increase has been thoroughly examined and found to be utterly baseless. Those who claim that astrology is a science and believe that the moon's gravitational force affects the human mind should solve one more problem. Due to meteor showers nearly ten lakh tons of dust accumulate on Earth, changing its mass. This should be taken into account too. Also, if astrology wishes to be recognised as a science, astrologers must mention the gravitational constant in their almanac, which they never do.

- Light travels at the speed of 300,000 kilometres per second and the sun's rays take nearly eight minutes to reach the Earth. So when we see the sun at a certain place and time, it is actually what the sun was up to eight minutes ago. During those eight minutes, the sun has moved on. This is the position of the sun, which is self-luminous. The planets that are much farther away from the sun than the Earth are not self-luminous; they can be seen only when they reflect the sun's rays. When we actually see these planets, they have moved far away from the spot where they appear to be. This means that they have crossed the border between the zodiacs; a discrepancy we don't even notice. But astrologers are not deterred by this. They place the planets in some zodiac irrespective of the fact that the planets are

not in that place now. The main principle of astrology states that the planets influence an individual according to their place in the zodiac. But the problem here is that they are not in the zodiac place where we observe them to be. According to which zodiac sign then do they affect our state? And how do they do that? This reality also disproves the other theory of astrology that constellations affect human life. The distance light travels in the passage of one year is called a light year and is equal to 94,60,80,00,00,000 (more than 9.46 trillion) kilometres. The stars of the constellations Krittika, Rohini, Mriga, among others are 500 light years from us. Now suppose a few stars in some of these constellations get destroyed. Their light, however, will keep reaching us for many years after, and astrologers will keep making utterly baseless statements, such as 'the moon is in so-and-so constellation in your horoscope'.

- Science has brought to light a new situation that destroys the very foundation of astrology. That the Earth rotates on its axis and revolves round the sun is a known fact. But along with these two motions, there is one more motion of the Earth which is called precession. It means that, while rotating round its own axis, the Earth also wobbles round it. Very slowly, the axis of rotation then changes. It takes the Earth 26,000 years to complete one circle of wobbling through 360 degrees. Presently, its axis is pointed towards the pole star. But 11,000 years hence it will point towards the constellation Vega. Now, combining this fact with the imaginary division of space around it into twelve parts, we see that the axis of the Earth's rotation moves from one constellation to the next in 2,200 years. The so-called science of astrology was also invented around that period, that is, 2,200 years ago. The constellations that were in the Vrishabha zodiac then are now in the Mithun zodiac. If this is accepted, which we should, the whole edifice of astrology turns topsy-turvy.
- Astrology also claims that planets affect human life through their electromagnetic force. The latest research has revealed that Mars, Venus and the moon do not have any magnetic field, although they all have an important

place in the horoscopes. This claim, therefore, simply cannot stand.

- Parents are scared if Mars happens to be in the first, fourth, seventh, eighth or twelfth place in the horoscope of their child. To believe that Mars in these places influences human life is to grant the planet a will of its own and also divine powers. Let us consider an example to make it clear. Madhuri was born in Mumbai and Mars occupied the seventh place in her horoscope. Hemangi was born at the same time as Madhuri but in Kolkata. In her horoscope, Mars was in the sixth place. This variation occurs because of the curvature of the Earth's surface. For the same reason, Kolkata time is one hour ahead of Mumbai time. So when Hemangi was born, Mars had sunk below the horizon and was in sixth place. At that time in Mumbai, Mars was about to set, that is, in the seventh place. The difference in the fortune of these two girls was caused by Mars. Let us keep aside the doubt about whether Mars discriminates, and if it does, why. But to believe that Mars does discriminate, one has also to believe that planets possess a will of their own, have divine powers and also possess knowledge of astrology! So, they are the ones who decide which individuals should be allotted what fruit on the basis of the place of his or her birth. Let the advocates of astrology, once and for all, admit this publicly; thereafter, there will be no dispute whether astrology is a science or superstition!
- Astrology also contains the concept of 'eka nad'. If the husband and wife are of eka nad they remain childless. That is what astrologers tell us. Nadi, which means the pulse in medicinal science, has nothing to do with the astrological nadi. According to astrology, out of the three nadis, the adya nadi, the first one, has the kapha (watery) nature, madhya nadi, the second, is of the pitta (fiery or bile) nature and the antya nadi, the third, is of the vata (gaseous or airy) nature. Thus, they are the agents of kapha, pitta and vata. (Kapha, pitta and vata are supposed to be the three defects—tridosh.) So the astrologers believe if two individuals of the same nadi marry, their progeny will show a pronounced defect of that nadi. The claim is

obviously baseless. For, if all the individuals of the world have to be of one of these three nadis, then on an average one-third of the total couples in the world ought to be childless. Not even an astrologer dares make this claim.

Some more inquiries

Nostradamus

The chaotic ramble of astrology makes innumerable claims and assertions that need to be exposed. Here, we mention only a few and then discuss what to make of them. A few years ago, in Maharashtra, people everywhere discussed the forecast of Nostradamus. He practised medicine in sixteenth-century France. But the fame he acquired was because of his book, *Centuries* , written in a clumsy Latin–French poetic language. He wrote ten 'centuries', each with a hundred stanzas of four lines each. He became famous worldwide due to the bestseller, *Prophecies of Nostradamus* , written by Erika Cheetham. She gives the original stanza of Nostradamus and its English translation and concludes that Nostradamus had divined all that was going to happen in the future. In India, G.S. Hiranyappa made him famous. He interpreted an extract from Nostradamus thus: 'In the year 2000 India will emerge as a powerful Hindu nation. And from the south will come forth a leader, who will enlighten not only India but the whole world spiritually.' The BJP in India and the Shiv Sena in Maharashtra were doing all they could to raise their influence in politics at that time. They exploited Nostradamus too in their propaganda drive. This euphoria, however, has now subsided.

Nostradamus wrote in verse and in very ambiguous language at that. One can interpret it any which way. The same stanza is often linked with several incidents. Interpreters find this very convenient. Happily for them, the forecasts mention no time or place. But the advocates of Nostradamus say that he did this deliberately to save himself from the wrath of the Church. In those days, Europe was under the sway of the Church's authority. Nostradamus would have been prosecuted for being influenced by Satan if the truth of his forecasts had been discovered. This argument, of course, is meaningless. Later, many new stanzas

were surreptitiously, and cautiously, inserted into new editions of Nostradamus's book. These new stanzas were zealously publicised to prove that events like the Gulf War of 1990 and the attack on the New York World Trade Centre on 11 September 2001 had already been forecast by him. Strange, mysterious things capture the human imagination. And if they are sensational and exciting, people take to them with great interest. Nostradamus's popularity has not diminished even after his predictions have been proven to be false. That is why his hollowness has to be repeatedly exposed.

Nadi astrology

In India, and especially in Maharashtra, the *Nadi Granth* is a much discussed issue. In nadi astrology centres, customers are asked to give their thumb impressions. Their name, their fathers' names and time, date and place of birth are also noted. The nadi astrologer always happens to have the relevant almanac at hand. The individual's zodiac sign and constellation becomes known from his or her birth date, and lagna-ras from the time of birth. If all of these details regarding an individual are already written in the nadi manuscript, where is the necessity to ask for more details about him? The possibility of there being more than one individual with the same name, same date, time and place of birth and also father's name is probably negligible. But the nadi astrologer goes through the motions of pretending to search for the appropriate manuscript, meanwhile collecting a lot of information from the customer. When the information collected is sufficient, he pretends to have found the correct manuscript. Otherwise, he declares that the correct manuscript is not available. When all the necessary information is gathered, any scroll (the nadi manuscripts are in the form of scrolls) can possibly be used for making the forecast.

The nadi experts should be asked to clarify why they need to ask so many questions obliquely if all the information is already written in the manuscript. For instance, they don't directly ask for one's mother's name; instead, they innocently ask, 'Does your mother's name start from y, r, l, or v? Is it the name of a goddess?' When the nadi experts claim that the manuscript contains not only the names and such other information, but

even the complete future of the individual, why do they not just read all that is written in it? The reason is obvious; it is not possible for them to predict anything before they shrewdly collect the necessary information.

When people (not knowing that they have been cheated) describe their experience in nadi astrology centres, they tend to exaggerate or even unwittingly lie. They quite approvingly tell us, 'We did not have to tell them anything; we only gave them our thumb impression. And yet the manuscript revealed everything!' They don't remember that they provided most of the information to the nadi expert while answering his questions; but that bit is revealed when the people who accompanied them are questioned. The nadi expert can hide behind the façade of the secret script. Leave aside Marathi-speaking people, even Tamilians cannot read it (nadi manuscripts are in an ancient Tamil script). So it is impossible to investigate what is actually written on the manuscript. There is another loophole available for the nadi expert. If he fails to extract enough information from the customer, he can always advance the excuse that the scroll has not been found. A fine illustration of how the world can be fooled if you are shrewd and wily enough!

Investigations by scientists

The moment one states that astrology is not a science, astrologers demand that this stand be proved. Those who think that the matter in question, that is astrology, can stand the test of scientific criteria ought to be required to provide evidence to that effect. But let us keep this rule aside for a while and ask these interlocutors, 'Will you accept it if we prove with enough evidence that astrology is not a science?' Matters are simplified if they honestly answer in the affirmative; because in the West, several scientific investigations of astrology have been carried out. The large number of such investigations with huge samples speak to both their authenticity and scientific meticulousness. Conclusions were drawn with complete neutrality and they were open to all the interested parties. The procedure of some of those tests was as follows: [2]

- Two reputed astrologers had declared that for a happy

married life, the couple should be of certain zodiac signs. This was investigated by Bernie Silverman of Michigan State University. He selected a large sample of 2,978 couples and 478 divorcees for his investigation. It failed to prove that only the couples whose zodiac signs matched did not divorce, nor did it prove that only the marriages of those couples where the zodiac signs matched were successful. In short, there was no connection between matching zodiac signs and a happy married life.

- The planets move in their own orbits in space. At certain times, two planets and the Earth's apex form a right angle. Later, an angle of 120 degrees is formed. These angles are respectively called 'kendrayog' (central conjunction) and 'trikonyog' (triangular conjunction). The former is considered inauspicious, while the latter is considered auspicious. Astrology is replete with many such strange rules. J. Nobalt studied the angles made by the planets at the time that individuals were born, and the astrological forecast based on that. This thesis was tabled in the Texas State University in the year 1978. There was no correlation between these angles and the predictions made. Nobalt's thesis offered concrete evidence to prove the futility of astrology.
- Astrologers can discern the build, height, get-up and other features of an individual from his zodiac sign. Roger Culver investigated features like the height and build, etc. of individuals, and the forecasts made on the basis of their horoscopes. He studied 300 individuals and found no correlation between the forecasts based on their horoscopes and the measurements such as the length of forearms, measures of their chest, waist, buttocks, length of feet, neck, girth of wrist and their weight.
- G.A. Tyson examined if there was any correlation between the date of birth of various people and their profession. He chose 10,313 graduates for his sample. No correlation whatsoever was found.
- Two scientists, Culver and Ienna, studied 301 forecasts made by the two famous astrologers Sydney Omarr and Carol Righter and others—10 per cent of these forecasts proved partially satisfactory. This percentage is much too

inadequate to validate the claim of astrology being a science. The language of all the 301 forecasts was ambiguous. The political forecasts made by them were such that any ordinary citizen could have easily made them.

- Books on astrology describe the specific characteristics of the zodiac signs. For instance, persons born in the Tool and Kumbh zodiac believe in equity; those born in the Dhanu zodiac are honest; or that the zodiacs of Kanya, Mithun and Makar produce intelligent individuals. E. Burney and Silverman, two psychologists of the Michigan University, examined 1,600 students of psychology without their knowledge. They found out the zodiac sign of every student from their date and time of birth. They found that there was no correlation between the students' zodiac signs and their behaviour.
- Silverman conducted an interesting test. He divided his sample into two groups, each consisting of fifty-one individuals. The individuals of the first group knew their zodiac signs. They were told twelve characteristics of the twelve zodiac signs and were invited to find which characteristics were appropriate for them. They all found the characteristics of their zodiac sign to be their own appropriate characteristics. The second group was told the same twelve characteristics without mentioning which zodiac they applied to. They were told that those twelve characteristics were twelve ways of life—30 per cent of this group chose ways appropriate to their zodiac. The first group chose those characteristics that applied not to themselves but to their zodiac signs. The second group chose the way that was appropriate to them. So 30 per cent zodiac signs and individual characteristics matched. But this is certainly not enough to establish a correlation between the zodiac signs and the specific characteristics of individuals.

All sciences are interdependent and their laws are complementary. But the so-called science of astrology is replete with many worthless laws, such that in order to validate its laws and call it a science, the laws of all other sciences have to be

ignored.

Many people in our country are in a great hurry to declare astrology a science. In other countries, a number of tests have been conducted on a large scale. Such tests can be conducted in India too without any difficulties. These tests should be completely neutral and scientific. If this is done, whether or not astrology is a science can be determined on the basis of scientific criteria and placed before the public with sufficient evidence.

Such a test was conducted in Pune, Maharashtra, by ANiS with the IUCAA (Inter University Centre of Astronomy and Astrophysics), a research institute of international standards and the Department of Statistics of the Pune University. The sample consisted of a 100 students from a school for mentally retarded children and a 100 students from other schools who always stood first in their class, a total of 200 students. The exact timings when these children were born were obtained and given to astrologers and astrological institutes. They were expected to make horoscopes for every student and decide whether that student was intelligent or mentally challenged on the basis of his horoscope. The odds of hitting upon the correct answer is 50 per cent. None of the astrologers could achieve even that much!

Barnum Effect

When people believe that the conclusions drawn by an astrologer in their case are correct are subject to something called the Barnum Effect. P. T. Barnum, the proprietor of the 'Barnum and Bailey Circus', used to say that all people young and old alike like his circus, because they have something for everyone. The inferences of the astrologer work in similar fashion. The language used is woolly and vague enough to touch some aspect of every person's life. When necessary, astrologers convince their clients about the veracity of their predictions with their ambiguous language.

Here's an example of an astrological portrait created using the Barnum method: 'You very much want people to like you and to praise you and appreciate your qualities. You examine yourself severely. You are going to prosper. You possess all the qualities that enable one to prosper but haven't had the break to put them to use. You might be lacking a bit here or there but you certainly

have the means to overcome the small deficiency. Outwardly, you seem to be disciplined and in complete control of yourself but sometimes you do feel anxious and insecure. At times you are in doubt whether the decision you have taken is right. You need occasional change; some variety in life. At times you are disgusted with the monotony of your life. You are proud that you think independently and do not accept statements made by others blindly, without examining them. You do not open yourself completely to anyone. Sometimes you are happy and tend to be extroverted and amiable while at other times you are depressed and feel dejected and become an introvert. A few of your ambitions might be inordinate but by and large you want security in life.'

This could apply to anyone, because it says nothing specific. If astrology really has a mechanism to predict the future correctly without fault, the sketch that it draws of a person based on his or her horoscope should be much more consistent with his or her actual character.

In fact Mars, Jupiter, Saturn and other planets are made of lifeless substances like minerals, stones or gases. Mars is 80 million kilometres from Earth; Jupiter is 630 million kilometres away and Saturn 1.28 billion kilometres. Now imagine, this planet Mars, that is at a distance of 80 million kilometres from us, revolving round the sun in the vastness of space for millions of years, appearing in the first, fourth, seventh, eighth or twelfth place of the horoscopes to obstruct the lives of a few girls who believe in astrology, out of the many million inhabitants of the Earth; the huge but lifeless planet Jupiter, 630 million kilometres from us, retarding and obstructing the studies of only some chosen students; and Saturn that is still further from us, in its thirty-year cycle of revolution, choosing to harass some selected people from India only, for as long as seven-and-a-half years! Isn't this all a fraud?

The long and short of all this lengthy discussion is that astrology is, at best, the art of selling dreams. We all like buying dreams. But if someone honestly wants to sell us dreams, we look at him askance. Astrology, which claims to be a science, in practice binds people with the chains of fatalistic thoughts, and so we must not only expose it but also fight it firmly.

People in this country are already fatalist by nature. Pushing

them further into that mindset, and gilding the act by calling it a science, is a crime against the movement of awakening and cannot be pardoned.

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2 http://www.truthmagazine.com/archives/volume34/GOT034263.html#N_5_

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Vastushastra: Science or Faith?

Meaning and demeaning

For many, their most cherished dream is to own a house, a place where they can experience life's joys and sorrows. All the necessary sanskars (essential and purificatory rites and ceremonies) from birth to death take place here. In many ways, the home is the locus for feelings and emotions. People, therefore, want it to provide them with security and comfort. The kitchen, storeroom, balcony and sink—everything must be neat and handy; it should be safe and sturdy. It is not always easy to tell who will like which type of house. That is why we have countless varieties of houses and all kinds of household furniture. Even an office or a workshop is done up to different individual tastes.

The construction of a house involves a number of decisions. The first decision is to choose the building site, which involves making sense of the surroundings, the texture of the soil, the availability of sunlight, and the normal temperature and rainfall at that place. In addition, one has to take into account the construction material that is available and how it can be used to construct a long-lasting structure. Since the occupant of the house, being a human being, possesses intelligence as well as emotions, social status, customs, behaviour and peculiar habits, all these aspects need to be taken into account. The scientific and skilful consideration of all these factors in the construction of a sturdy, comfortable and beautiful house is 'vastushastra', that is, the science of architecture.

As dear as a home might be to its owner, if he begins to face problems after moving in, he will worry. Then, if he is told that

the all these ills—frequent illness, disappointment in finding a match for his daughter, bickering in the family, decline in business, and so on—are because the vastu, or the structure, is not propitious for him, he begins to wonder if there might be some truth in that. But consider the following:

- This theory further tells us that illness is caused not because of diet or sanitation, but because someone is sleeping with his head turned towards the north.
- Whether there will be obstacles in one's daughter's marriage depends on which direction the cooking stove is situated in.
- Bickering in the house is caused by the thorny cactus in the drawing room and not because of the temperament of family members.
- If one commits the blunder of constructing toilets in the north-east direction, then one has to suffer the consequences—a prosperous business goes to seed; this has no connection to the economic policy or the cut-throat competition that one is facing.

All of this shows up the human mind as an irrational, capricious thing. That the place of dwelling, office or workshop is safe and convenient is not enough; it also has to be 'auspicious'. The structure should begin to shower rewards on the owner as soon as he occupies it. One should find the perfect match; another should pass his exams with flying colours; all illness should walk out forever, and the owner's name and fame should spread far and wide. There is no need to ponder about the causal relationship between the dwelling place one occupies and the fulfilment of one's dreams.

People have the same expectation from their office or workshop buildings too. It should be auspicious for them. They expect their business to start prospering immediately; no labour problems should crop up; or no accidents should occur. If the office premises grant all these to a businessman, then the vastu is good. There are always some architects or builders who promise to (but do not actually) fulfil all these irrational demands. It is a simple demand-and-supply principle. Cheats are aplenty when people ask to be cheated! A student of architecture spends five

years studying the subject in a college, while a follower of Vishwakarma—the original sage who divined vastushastra, the theory of auspiciousness or otherwise of a dwelling—becomes a sthapati or vastu expert, without any training. Both are working with the same subject, but the former believes in modern science, while the latter in ancient divine knowledge.

Vastushastra, even a few years ago, was restricted only to south India where it was popular. But it has now captured the imagination of the modern, highly educated people of Maharashtra. This ancient shastra is playing havoc with people and their dwellings not just in the big metropolises—Mumbai, Pune, Nashik, Aurangabad—but even in the smaller towns at the district and taluk level. Consulting a vastu expert has become de rigueur before building a bungalow. Existing buildings are altered according to the vastu expert's advice at the cost of lakhs of rupees. From the location of gates to drinking water tanks, all fixtures are being shifted overnight. And it is not just a fad of the rich; even the middle class who live in apartments have been duped by vastushastra. East-facing flats in buildings sell quickly because they are expected to prove auspicious for the owner. At times, to eliminate this shortcoming (not facing an appropriate direction), a huge mirror is fixed facing the door. That way, at least an image of the door faces the right direction.

Quite a few laymen as well as builders and the architects are captivated by the ancient science of vastushastra. When approaching an architect well-equipped with the knowledge of modern technology, people also carry with them a blueprint of the house drawn by a vastu expert, who is, if anything, valued more than the highly qualified architect. This kind of intellectual slavery reveals how far removed the educated intelligentsia is from reason.

These days, even vastu experts cannot resist dressing their field up as science. They have, therefore, adopted the terminology of science. For instance, this sentence: 'The ancient sages, with their divine vision deliberated on the invisible *vibrations of energy* and discovered the relationship between the type of dwellings and the effect it will produce on those who dwell in it.' This is what various modern tomes on vastushastra claim. Further, they add, 'The *light and heat* from the sun and the *magnetism* of the Earth affect us constantly. The structure of the

house stops the sun's rays from entering the house while doors and windows let them in, partially, to reach us. They affect the *biochemical processes* of our body and our mind through these processes to the extent they reach us. *Scientifically* , the rays of the rising sun (from 5 a.m. to 7 a.m.) are quite important. They contain *ultraviolet rays* . When these rays enter the house, they *destroy all diseases* and also evil thoughts. So it is beneficial to have the door of the house opening to the east. Work done while facing the east is sure to be quite successful; one should, therefore, do as much work as possible facing the east.' (Emphases added.) And so on and so forth.

With slovenly thinking come easy arguments and conclusions. For example, look at the causal relationship of the place of the well in the house or the borewell or any other water storage facility and its effects. If it is in the north-east, it will bring prosperity; if in the east, it brings riches; if in the south-east, it will cause the death of sons; if in the south, the wife or the woman of the house dies; in the south-west, it causes the death of the owner; if in the west, it will bring money; in the north-west it creates uncalled-for enmity; in the north, it brings comfort and content. Above all, if the well or borewell is in the centre of the house, that is, the brahmasthan of the house, god help the owner! If the source of water is placed right in the brahmasthan, it will ruin cause mental imbalance and unrest in the life of those living in the house. With so many complications, buying and selling land is not just a financial transaction; it also involves 'divine' considerations. Consider what vastu experts say regarding this: 'Never buy a piece of land just because it is cheap or it is convenient for reaching school or office but see whether it fits into all the principles of vastushastra. It means consider the slope of the land, the roads passing close to it, ditches and pits nearby before you buy it. If all these components are in accordance with the principles laid down in vastushastra, then alone will the house built on it prosper and flourish.'

This shastra also paints in dire hues the calamities that will befall one if its 'scientific warning' is disregarded. Repeated accidents, constant illnesses, operations, untimely deaths and other misfortunes will visit the offender. Incidents of infertility, idiocy, suicide are all sure signs of defective vastu (structure or house). Setbacks in business, financial crises, inability in

marriage-fixing, disturbance in the household, all these are also caused by the defects in the vastu. After listening to all these threats and the consequences of ignoring them, the person craving for his home, sweet home, cannot but fall at the feet of the vastu expert. (Vastushastra isn't just any ordinary discipline. It has the sanction of our rich religious heritage. In the West, while building a house, directions like east and west are used to factor in rain, sunlight, or wind. But those poor beings have no knowledge that, in the eight directions surrounding a house, there are the abodes of eight deities on whose mercy depends the prosperity and tranquillity of the house.)

Hardly any believer understands the priest's chants when he is offering pooja to appease the vastu deities. The religious content means: 'In the war of the gods and the demons, the demons were defeated. So the demons performed a yagna. On successful culmination of the yagna, when the Bhargavas quietly prostrated on the ground, drops of their sweat fell on the sacrificial fire. This rekindled life into the sacrificed animal. He grew enormously and became a colossal demon called Chagasur. On the command of the Bhargavas, he leapt into the sky and ousted all the gods from heaven. Frightened by Chagasur, the gods implored Lord Shankar to protect them from Chagasur. Lord Shankar created a phantom and asked him to first destroy Bhargava and then Chagasur. Bhargava cunningly ran away and hid himself in Shankar's belly by entering it through his ear. Assured of protection, Bhargava came out of his (Shankar's) body through his semen. Hence, he was called Shukracharya. Shukracharya then told Chagasur to prostrate before Lord Shankar in order to save himself. He was assured of protection when he prostrated with his head facing the north-east, that is, facing Lord Shankar. He was asked to remain prostrate in that position and let the gods dwell on his body. Any piece of land under construction is thus supposed to be occupied by the body of this demon in the guise of vastupurush. The gods reside on the various parts of his body and we appease them all by worshipping the vastupurush, that is, the demon Chagasur.'

All this lengthy antiquity and firm roots in religion are not enough to bestow dignity on this discipline; so vastu experts mimic the language of science. Some architects, engineers and builders too swear by vastushastra and encourage the fraud. To

build an aura of genuine science round this ancient scripture, terms like energy flow theory, topology theory and hartman greed, are used. It is also claimed that vastushastra is not an experimental science; but, in fact, a pure science. It is concerned with the effect of electromagnetism, the influence of stars and planets in the sky, cosmic rays and the like on individuals. Consider this reasoning: In the buildings that are erected with the help of steel rods, the magnet in the Earth and the iron in the structure form an electromagnetic field which intersects the magnetic field around the individual and in turn forms microelectronic charges. They affect the electrical pulses of the nervous system resulting in complaints from mental states to diseases of all sorts. The blood contains iron. Magnetic fields affect the iron in the blood and lead to many circulation problems. To avoid all these difficulties there is only one sure solution—follow vastushastra.

Even mythology (the Earth is covered by Chagasur), antiquity, religion and mimicking scientific jargon—do not seem to make for a complete theory. So one more aspect is added to it prarabdha, or destiny. Vastushastra can turn even a merciless destiny into a tolerable one. B.N. Reddy was a Member of Parliament and a vastushastra expert. In his opinion, all the sufferings that Rajiv Gandhi, V.P. Singh, Narasimha Rao and Chandrashekhar had to undergo while they were in power and later were all due to their faulty vastus (the structures where they lived in and worked in). The doors of their houses faced the south-west! Destiny therefore turned against them. Had their doors been facing the north-east, everything would have been just fine.

The most objectionable aspect of this vastushastra is its clear espousal of the varnavyavastha (the caste system). According to this shastra, land that is whitish in colour, of sweet character and smells of ghee should be allotted to brahmins; land whitish in colour but pungent to taste and smelling of blood should be given to Kshatriyas; Vaishyas should get yellowish land, bitter in taste and smelling of food; while the Shudras should be given land that is black in colour, bitter like some decoction and smelling of beverage. Thus this so-called vastushastra is hostile to the values enshrined in our Constitution. Science just cannot justify or support such a theory.

Truth and fallacy in the ancient vastushastra

There is absolutely nothing wrong with being objectively proud of our ancient heritage. But to assume and claim that our ancestors knew everything that modern science knows and did everything that modern technology is capable of doing is simply pigheaded obstinacy. Today, in the age of science, we should objectively assess what is proper or improper, right or wrong, scientific or unscientific.

Technology has developed immensely since the days of yore. There were very limited ways in which buildings could be constructed. The superstructure above the ground mainly consisted of wooden pillars, beams, rafters and crossbeams, planks of the ceiling and such things. If a plot of the land was not square or rectangular but stretched at a corner, it became extremely difficult to construct a ceiling of wooden planks with the technology then available. Vastushastra of those days, out of necessity, required the plot of land to be a square or a rectangle. This rule is no longer applicable because modern technology can cast any shape out of cement and concrete, and utilise to the maximum all available space. Similarly, the requirement that the plot of the house should not be at a T-junction of two roads is no longer pertinent. The mud roads of those days and vehicles like bullock carts, chariots or horse riders created dust clouds. Today, all the roads where there is heavy traffic are either tarred or concrete, and there are hardly any horses or bullock carts, only rubber-tyred motor vehicles. The old premise is no longer reasonable.

Also, in the days of old, houses were in a row, with common walls between adjacent structures. In such a situation, the house that faced the south lacked ventilation and resulted in the ill health of its residents. Hence the rule that a house should not face the south. Today, many structures stand isolated and are required by law to leave a certain open space around them. Similarly, it is ridiculous to mull over things such as which direction of the plot a well, a water source, a river or lake is situated. When the water tank situated on the terrace of the building supplies water through pipes wherever it is needed, is there any sense in pondering these issues? It's a pity that people still indulge in such unproductive thoughts, and even act on it to

their own peril and that of the other residents of the house.

In the tropics, the direction of the wind changes from the east to the south according to the changing seasons. Keeping this in mind, vastushastra stipulated that the kitchen should be at the south-east side of the house. Smoke was inevitable while cooking food on firewood. It would be carried away if the kitchen were facing south-east. But since LPG and electricity have replaced wood as fuel (especially in urban homes), why should one insist on a kitchen in the south-east?

When shown a blood report or a chest X-ray of a patient, all physicians in the world will offer the same diagnosis, that is, they are bound to state whether the concerned person is or is not diabetic or has or does not have tuberculosis. But this is medical science, not vastushastra. Ask two vastu experts for their opinion on any one house; it is quite likely that their opinions will contradict each other's. This is not surprising, for the very foundation of vastushastra is unscientific. The house, it is said, is either lucky or unlucky, but it is not clear who benefits or suffers from it. Is it the owner of the house or the tenant? Vastushastra fails to state this explicitly. What it tells us is this: if the plot is triangular, there are quarrels in the house. So would the members of a close-knit family, with very cordial relations, actually begin quarrelling when they shift into a triangular plot? Our great vastushastra believes they will. Similarly, when office furniture is rearranged in consonance with the principles of vastushastra, the setback in business will turn into prosperity. A house that is west- and south-oriented, the shastra claims, cannot but be plagued with illness. How illness can be related to the direction of the door of the house instead of the hygiene habits of its occupants is beyond one's imagination. The aim here seems to be to elevate vastushastra to the last word on whether a structure is auspicious. Once such a status is bestowed on it, it follows that all criteria stipulated by vastushastra ought to be fulfilled in every structure, be it a hospital, temple, workshop, business complex, educational institution, whatever. There is also a demand to introduce astrology as a science for graduation and vastushastra as part of modern engineering. A question arises here: if all our temples were meticulously built on the scientific foundation of vastushastra, how is that so many of them were effortlessly destroyed or vandalised by one aggressor after

another? But such questions have no place when conviction replaces reason.

Intellectual bankruptcy and mental slavery

Human beings and social systems cause all the problems that we currently face. An able-bodied young man remains unemployed not because of the house in which he lives. It is the economic policy of the country that is responsible for his joblessness. The plot of a workshop or its structure have nothing to do with the labour unrest there. That is caused by an antagonistic relationship between the management and workers. Prosperity and affluence result from a proper handling of individual efforts and matching it with the fiscal dynamics of the industry.

People are aware of all this. But the common argument is: what is the harm in finding out whether the principles of vastushastra really work? This seemingly innocuous argument involves not only some petty losses but also a very grave crime; thinking irrationally in this manner is an insult to our Constitution, to our self and to humanity. According to the Constitution, every citizen has responsibilities that he or she ought to fulfil. One of these is to develop and propagate a scientific outlook, which very briefly means examining causality. Everything happens as the result of a cause–effect relationship that can be established cohesively. And there is absolutely no causality whatsoever between the location of the well and the consequence—whether prosperity or death—of that location. Similarly no cause–effect relationship can be found between prosperity and the direction of the door, or between the west direction and loss, or the south and the god of death. All this mumbo jumbo is nothing but a case of misleading and cheating people.

In fact, governments have made some rules and regulations for construction that every builder has to follow. Their laudable intention is to avoid loss of life and property as much as possible in calamities like earthquake, fire etc. These rules have a scientific foundation. Even a common man understands the simple rules of architecture, like—all rooms should have privacy; the drawing room and the bedrooms should be airy; bathrooms and toilets should be in the opposite direction to the wind; the

sink and the compartment for the gas cylinder should be on the opposite sides of the kitchen platform; there should be provision for an exhaust fan in the kitchen, etc. One can easily discern their causality, and there are qualified architects everywhere to advise people further, if needed.

All this prudence and wisdom is thrown to the winds when it comes to vastushastra, though. Common sense and pragmatism have no further place in the planning of the house. In case the house is already built, a lot of breaking and rebuilding, rearrangements and renovations are carried out, which of course only the rich can afford. The poor are dragged into this net and become poorer. Now, affordable sham vastu experts cater to the needs of the not-so-rich. People forget they are *Homo sapiens* — not just animals, but animals that are wise and can think—and surrender their own willpower, become cowards and act helplessly.

In addition to the propitiousness or portentousness of the house, people get entangled in a host of other things like fate, mantras, talismans, charms, amulets, yagna, fire sacrifices, gurus, maharajas and what not. They lose their free will and, to top it all, justify their decisions as scientific. They strengthen a fatalistic outlook in themselves and in society. If their entire plan fails, they argue, 'It's our fate, not vastushastra that has failed us.' This ever-growing defeatist psyche of the urban educated society is very disheartening and bodes grave danger.

Causality, objectivity, universality

In science, it is absolutely essential to fulfil the three basic criteria—causality, objectivity and universality. However, not a single claim made in vastushastra fulfils any of these. There is absolutely no causal relationship between the good and bad effects as specified in vastushastra and the remedies suggested. The events that occur have no causal relationship to the vastu. All this mumbo jumbo is meant to hoodwink people.

In this so-called science, the question, 'In which part of the house should the water be stored?' is of great import. Not observing the rules regarding this portends grave consequences, from the death of a near and dear one, to drastic penury. But the problem here is that it is not clear what constitutes water

storage: is it the tap, the overhead tank or the city water supply source? Moreover, even if we decide to go by this rule, on what basis can we accept it as the only available alternative and no other alternative that can fulfil the criterion of causality?

Secondly, vastushastra, being a divine study, is full of completely subjective instances and examples. Never are they objectively examined. For instance, if toilets that are situated in the north-east are demolished and rebuilt in the proper direction, the restructuring is supposed to resurrect the currently defunct plant. Now let us, for a while, overlook all other causes for the closure of the plant. Yet, vastu experts can at least do one thing. They can investigate the direction in which the toilets of the thousands of closed-down units in industrial areas are built and collect statistics to support their conviction.

But whenever challenged to identify the conjunction of these two required particulars—the direction of toilets and the closure of industrial units—vastu pandits quickly shy away. Calling such a branch of learning 'science' is to debase science. It may be called, as suggested by Dr Jayant Narlikar, Vastu Faith.

Universality, the third criterion of science, too throws vastushastra off balance. Any trained medical practitioner, when shown the blood report of a patient, will accurately diagnose whether the patient is diabetic or not. Medicine, a science, fulfils the criterion of universality. Two vastu pandits, on the other hand, when asked for advice on building a house in a particular place will have different or even contradictory opinions, and each will claim that only his counsel is right. All over the world, there are many such speculative and unscientific disciplines with no universal laws. If they insist on calling their discipline a science, let them give unstinted consent to scientific investigation.

The main concerns while building a house should be air, water, atmospheric temperature, wind, sun, rain, level of the land and availability of building material and other related things. Plenty of scientific knowledge and know-how is available regarding all of these. The government's rules and regulations in this connection too are helpful and explicit enough.

Consumers' rights

Medicines are necessary for maintaining good health although they may not be required every day. No medicine can be sold across the counter unless it has undergone systematic and rigorous tests, because it is a crime to play with people's lives. Why then should buildings in which people are expected to spend their whole lives or do business be built, sold and occupied without any scientific investigation? Shouldn't it be highly objectionable that some practitioners are able to persuade consumers with beguiling artifices? If a properly certified physician gives wrong treatment to his patient, he can be prosecuted under the Consumer Protection Law. The same law should apply to the vastu pandit who, without any qualification whatsoever, makes a householder undertake structural changes in his house at great cost. At a time when highly developed architectural science and technology are available, shouldn't these vastu pandits who are engendering superstition be held legally responsible for it?

In all discourses and debates on vastushastra, one point always is brought up to sidetrack the main issue. And that is: those who insist that vastushastra is not a science should prove that it is not. Here, one point needs to be made very clear; its those who proclaim that their shastra is science that should prove it scientifically. And they should stop playing with people's emotions and exploiting them until they are able to prove that their claims are valid.

Housing for the poor: the real problem

What we need today is real, pragmatic vastushastra (indigenously designed architecture) that uses locally available building material for maximum utility, enough durability and minimum cost. Crores of people in this country don't own a house and cannot aspire to one. Their shanty houses and slum dwellings barely qualify as a home. Many more live on the footpath under the open sky. We recently celebrated the diamond jubilee of India's independence; it is high time, that the right of these crores of citizens to possess at least a small dwelling place of their own is acknowledged and they are provided with such dwellings at the earliest. Concrete housing requires cement, bricks, steel and such other things that are in

short supply. Much less cement is produced than is required. To build crores of houses, billions of bricks will have to be produced from the top soil. This top soil, the humus, takes a very long time to build up naturally. So, making bricks means rendering fertile land barren. The need of the hour is indigenous architecture that is capable of building strong, long-lasting and affordable housing using locally available material.

Vastushastra is obliterating rationality, especially amongst the highly educated people who are supposed to shoulder the responsibility of governance and legislature, industry and agriculture, construction of buildings and infrastructure, in short, the progress and well-being of the country. Why are we so poor and backward today? Is it because of ever-increasing corruption? Is it because of the criminalisation of politics, inefficient administration, or insatiable greed? Vastushastra quashes all these real, pressing issues in a jiffy. It ascribes all these menacing issues to the faulty construction of ministers' dwellings. Vastu experts even audaciously proclaim that the shape of Sri Lanka is the real cause of the unrest there. They analyse the situation in our country too in the same vein. The person who is carried away by this delusional tradition gives up his will and reasoning. All he achieves is mental slavery which is much more dangerous than political slavery. We ought to get rid of this enslaving yoke of vastushastra and other ancient wisdoms of that ilk and thereby liberate ourselves from the mental slavery they cause.

4

Pseudoscience

The original Greek word 'pseudo' means untruth, pretence or deception. In English, it means that which is not true or factual or which is not genuine; it is something that imitates the true or masquerades as the authentic.

Science makes us perceptive, capable of seeing things rationally. It teaches us causality. The searchlight of science cripples the hauteur acquired through chanting, performing rites, yagnas and other superstitions. So, those with vested interests use scientific jargon to explain their irrational ideas and claiming scientific validity. To understand the dangers of this tactic, one must define science in the first place; this means fully comprehending the following important points.

- In science, it is taken for granted that the universe is law-governed. Its 'autonomous orderliness' exists since birth and will last till the end. For instance, the law of gravitation will never change. This unchangeability is missing in pseudoscience.
- Any principle that science discovers has to be enunciated in precise terms, because science does not tolerate ambiguity.
- All scientific principles are of interim or provisional nature, in the sense that they are liable to be discarded as soon as better and more inclusive explanations become available. Science accepts its mistakes straightaway and corrects itself.
- Science never claims to know the answers to all problems.
- Any principle that is scientifically enunciated has to pass each of the above tests. If it fails any of these criteria, it

has to be considered a pseudoscience.

The list of pseudosciences includes acupuncture, astrology, magnetic therapy (magneto-therapy), vastushastra as well as many other less known forms. All over the world, even in Western countries and technologically advanced Eastern countries like Japan, pseudoscience is still used to take people for a ride. The 2002 report published by the American National Science Foundation reveals that 30 per cent adult Americans believe that flying saucers from other planets visit the Earth; 40 per cent believe that astrology is a science; 60 per cent find that there is some truth in parapsychology and 70 per cent believe that magneto-therapy is scientific.

Certain characteristics differentiate pseudoscience from science; when properly understood, these characteristics enable one to immediately sort one out from the other. They are:

- The self-styled pseudoscience researcher, eager to prove his research findings, will not publish those findings in a well-recognised science magazine but rush to the media to make it breaking news.
- Such investigators keep complaining that the established system is trying to suppress their findings or stifle their voice.
- The evidence to validate their findings—photos, specimens, reports of tests, etc.—are presented in a very ambiguous way.
- Instead of clear-cut, mathematical language, a narrative form and poetic flowery language is used to write the 'story' of the research. (A famous example of such research from Maharashtra is: A scholar with a doctorate who claimed that he had transformed into a microscopic body, gone to the planet Mars and carried out investigations there and then came back to narrate what he had seen there to the poor mortals of planet Earth—the Dr P.V. Vartak case that was reported in the Maharashtra press some years ago.)
- Quite often, pseudoscience is based on the testimony of what is written in the Puranas or other ancient scriptures. So one has to be wary about those who defend their claims

arguing that people have been using this science for ages; faith lasting for ages cannot be false.
- Such investigators are lone riders. They work independently and far removed from others.
- They insist that to verify their investigations new rules and new procedures are required. No true scientist will ever ask for new rules to validate his or her findings.

Pseudoscience justifies itself in three ways. It tries to dress prevailing religious rituals in scientific garb. Secondly, many pseudosciences are utilised for setting up roaring businesses. Thirdly, they eulogise disciplines like parapsychology to gain people's recognition for themselves. Here are some examples and explanations to clarify the point:

- Hom-havan (fire sacrifice) is a ritual that involves wasting time and food and other material which is useful for people. But it is acclaimed as agnihotra, that which is capable of cleansing the atmosphere of all pollution. Agnihotra is nothing but a process of burning on a small scale. Everyone knows that any burning process uses up oxygen from the surroundings and thereby pollutes the air. But the proponents of agnihotra deny this plain scientific truth. And if you dare ask them, 'In which laboratory was the claim proved that smoke coming out of the agnihotra is capable of killing germs?,' it becomes an affront to their pious religious ritual. These days, the markets are flooded with books on religious subjects. Many of these books are no longer written in the traditional style. The writers, shrewd enough to notice a change in the public mood, give a scientific coating to religious observances like the recitation of the Gayatri mantra, circumambulation around a deity, wearing a rudraksha, drinking the water of the river Ganges, etc. The pseudoscientist claims that performing these actions are beneficial. According to them, uttering the Gayatri mantra produces some specific micro waves that activate circulation and give extra energy to the person who recites it and the super electrical particles light up the whole body system. This is an attempt is to embed pseudoscience in the minds of people with these pompous

and unintelligible words. An argument for circumambulation is that the deities residing in the idols that are circumambulated are radiant. The auras of their radiance or its waves are constantly circulating round the idol from right to left. If the devotee also circumambulates from the right of the idol to its left, illuminating particles in the aura stick to his/her body and purify not only the body (the outer envelope) but the mind too. Piety is attached to other things, like 'sacred' ash, a rudraksha rosary, the pious water of abhishek (ceremonial ablution) in much the same fashion to explain the necessity and propriety of the ritual.

- Magneto-therapy is one more example of how pseudoscience is exploited as a means of making money. The hypothesis of magneto-therapy runs like this: our blood contains haemoglobin (a proven fact); there is iron in haemoglobin (true again); a magnet attracts iron (very true); so the blood circulation of a person who uses magnets must improve! In this apparently persuasive argument, the beguiling artifice is the untruth that the magnet affects blood circulation because of its iron content. The truth, though, is that the positively charged iron in the haemoglobin is not attracted by any magnet. Thus, people are fed with unscientific conclusions in the name of science.

Parapsychology too should be considered a pseudoscience. Students of parapsychology believe that some exceptional power of the mind can disregard the laws discovered by science and make impossible things happen. In every culture, such powers are related to religion or mysticism. In the late nineteenth century, people started paying attention to these so-called powers. In England, in the year 1882, The Society for Psychical Research was founded. And in 1887, The American Society for Psychical Research was established. Many such societies came into being in other countries too. A few well-known scientists also participated in the study of psychical phenomena. At the insistence of these societies, some universities even supported research into this field. Psychical power is said to be of four types:

1. Telepathy;
2. Clairvoyance;
3. Precognition;
4. Psychokinesis.

The supporters of these powers define them as follows. Telepathy means the power to comprehend thoughts in the mind of another person without the help of any known means of communication. In clairvoyance, an incident has already occurred and the person with this power, with no other means of knowing about it, divines that the event has occurred. For instance, a theft has occurred and the clairvoyant person did not witness it. Yet, they are able to describe what the thief looks like to the police. Someone with the power of precognition know of incidents that will happen in the future, whereas the person with psychokinetic power moves things without using any material force.

When research began in this field, in the beginning, it mainly concentrated on personal experiences. There were many weak links in the personal experiences studied. In some instances, it was revealed that information had reached the clairvoyant in advance. At other times, it was sheer chance, while a few were plain trickery.

In order to study these psychic powers scientifically, a specific method needed to be evolved. A test based on cards, invented by the psychologist J.B. Rhine, is considered the standard method for this purpose. The cards are more or less like playing cards. Each one has a figure on it, like a square, star, cross, circle and lines, with twenty-five cards make a set.

The person taking the test of telepathy sits in room A. The person from whom he receives the signals sits in room B. Care is taken to ensure there is no communication from B to A. The person in room B is shown the cards. How many signs (printed on the cards) this person in room B can transmit to the person in A by telepathy are counted. For the test of clairvoyance, the cards are turned down so that the figures are not visible. The person concerned is expected to tell the correct order of the cards. In the test for precognition, the person is expected to reveal beforehand in what order the cards will appear after shuffling.

Many books have been written on parapsychology. They report instances of parapsychology, taking it for granted that the existence of psychical power has already been proved. But grave doubts have been expressed regarding them, because as the experiments devised to prove the existence of psychic powers are full of errors and weak links. Moreover, they are not carried out scrupulously and in the presence of those who utterly disbelieve it. Nobody has so far been able to prove that he or she persistently possesses psychic power and can control it. They proffer many reasons for not being able to prove their claim. One excuse is that the power depends on the mental state. If the psychic's mind is cheerful and joyous, the power turns up. If the psychic's mind is gloomy and anxious, it disappears. (And quite naturally, the power is all the more likely to disappear while undergoing tests!)

There are some subtypes of pseudoscience. They are pro-science, sick science, junk science, alternate science, fringe science, bad science and anti-science. Whatever the name they use, in reality they are like spurious duplicates of diamond jewellery.

Pro-science is fairly close to science. It passes many scientific tests, but fails a few of them. Sick science or pathological science is based on the wrong concepts. It poses as real science for a while and even gets recognition, but because of the rigorous discipline of science, the mistakes in it are revealed sooner or later. In science, too, there are examples of wrong concepts being accepted as the truth. Poly-water, recognised around the 1970s as one more form of water, like vapour and ice, is an example. Those who discovered it claimed that it was a form of water that boils at higher than the normal boiling temperature for water, and similarly freezes at low temperatures. But more careful investigation disproved the claim, and today, science rejects the idea of poly-water.

The goal of science is to obtain a comprehensive vision of the whole cosmos surrounding us and present it in a holistic framework. Constant experiments and research activities are carried out to achieve this goal. Pseudoscience is completely devoid of any such efforts. It depends mostly on the wisdom accumulated 'thousands of years ago'. And no one can be sure that the discipline of science was strictly adhered to in the

remote past.

Everyone who claims his or her finding as scientific must answer the question, 'What specific evidence will disprove your theory?' This is a very important test in science. To prove that one's finding is science and not pseudoscience, passing the refutability test is essential. When a new theory is proposed by a researcher, other scientists working in the same field search for instances that do not tally with the new theory. The one who has propounded the theory has to explain the discrepancies. In this way, the new discovery is either reinforced or disproved. This is not done out of jealousy or enmity, but to establish the truth of the researcher's findings. To raise doubts and to obtain a proper explanation is a part of the discipline of science. On the other hand, in pseudoscience, raising doubts is taboo. Those who do are snubbed, and their authority questioned. As a result, findings that have been proven to be wrong are never discarded in pseudoscience.

Yet, this does not mean that all that goes under the name of pseudoscience is to be thrown out into the wastepaper basket. Especially in pro-science, with the exception of those findings that have been disproved by science, there are quite a few things that may prove useful when investigated with more discipline. In this sense, scientific outlook remains modest and unassuming, but exacting and rigorous when it comes to verifying the truth.

5

Mind and Mental Illness

Demoniac possession, the afflictive visitation of a goddess and other travails

Everybody, be he or she a scientist, a littérateur or a layman, is curious about the phenomenon known as the mind. However, many of us have no idea about where the mind is and what happens when it falls sick. For such a frequently used word, little is actually known about it. Everyone has some faint ideas about their mind. Bahinabai, a nineteenth-century rural Maharashtrian poet, in her poetry, describes it as follows: 'One moment, it is as small as a poppy seed; and look, in the next, it grows large enough to embrace the whole sky!'

Because we don't know enough about the mind, mental illnesses, even today, baffle us and remain mysterious diseases. This is why there is a great fear of mental illness. There are many reasons for this dread:

- Even a physically fit person can become the victim of a mental illness.
- Severe symptoms of the illness appear all of a sudden and could disappear just as suddenly. The illness might appear without any apparent cause or incident that could have disturbed the afflicted person. Also, it can revisit the individual time and again. This deepens the mystery.
- At times, astonishing but temporary recovery is seen to take place merely by suggestion, threat, intimidation or beating. The divine power, as also the person who claims to possess such power—usually a mantrik or a bhagat—is hastily given a lot of credit for this temporary

improvement. The improvement soon disappears and, to the surprise of onlookers, the condition of the afflicted person deteriorates. Then the concerned parties begin rationalising the unexpected—the affliction was far too powerful; the bhagat could not overpower the evil spirit, etc.

- These illnesses may be hereditary to some extent, and appear in certain families, generation after generation. One or more individuals of every generation may get afflicted. At times, an intermediate generation (being a silent carrier) escapes from the illness. But it reappears in the next generation. Such a family is then dubbed as having been cursed by an angry spirit.
- The mind of a mentally ill person could be a mysterious jumble of suspicions, fears, and wittingly or unwittingly suppressed thoughts, expectations, desires and wishes. These can be observed through the actions of the patient. It is not always possible to interpret them coherently; yet we do get some clues to discern what may be causing the disturbance in the patient's mind. People around them try to interpret the patient's actions and words according to their own understanding and, in the bargain, cause more confusion and mystery.

The nature of the human mind

The study of the mind means a study of human behaviour, that is, of emotions, thoughts and actions. These things are governed by the system called the mind. Here is an example to explain it better. Let us consider the question, what is government? The answer could be—people's representatives, administration, a court for dispensation of justice, a system to organise the defence of the country and many other things. Each of these answers is partially true. In reality, all these and many more facets together constitute the government. Similarly, the mind of an individual encompasses his intelligence, emotions, desires, memory, ideas, consciousness and many other aspects, all considered together. The human brain comprises of 1,000 billion neurons that are interconnected with each other through electrochemical pulsations. The brain, that is, these neurons and their

electrochemical pulsations, make up the mind, which is both teleological and self-conscious. These differences in the human brain separate *Homo sapiens* from the rest of the animal world.

The structure and the functioning of the brain are extremely complex. Even an animal at the lowest rung of the ladder of evolution has a brain that can control processes essential for life, like respiration and heartbeat. In animals which are further along the ladder of evolution, the functioning of the brain becomes progressively more complex. In addition to controlling respiration and heartbeat, the brain also acts to defend itself, is capable of anger and can also control reflex actions. These functions are still very simple and primitive in comparison with the far more advanced brain of humans. The sophisticated thoughts, emotions and the conscience that humans possess are the outcome of the development of their brain. Only a brain which has developed to a great extent can control natural drives. Studies of the brain structure of animals reveal that the brain of less-developed animals is confined to certain basic functions that operate vital life processes.

The human brain, too, has centres that control respiration and heartbeat. But they form a very small part of the brain. As the thoughts and emotions of the human animal progressed, other parts of the brain—the frontal lobe, prefrontal lobe and limbic system—developed and occupied more and more space in the brain. This process culminated in the human brain as we know it today. The portion of the human brain that controls thoughts, emotions and behaviour is much larger than the corresponding portion in any other animal. All mental processes are controlled by this new brain known as the ‘neocortex’. The innumerable neurons of the brain, as already mentioned, are interconnected. These interconnections are called synapses. Neurons and synapses form a vast network in the human brain that carry out the processes of sending messages all over the body, and controlling all glands, limbs and muscles. The synapses play a very big and important part in this process. They contain chemicals like serotonin, epinephrine, norepinephrine and GABA (gamma aminobutyric acid). The transmission of messages depends on the proportion of these chemicals in the synapses. Transmission gets muddled when the balance of these chemicals is disturbed. Emotions and thoughts controlled by the part of the

brain in which the balance is disturbed also get muddled up. For instance, serotonin calms the mind, but an increase in its levels causes delusions or delirium. Dopamine controls body movements through the brain and a deficiency of it causes Parkinson's disease.

Freud's view of human beings

Dr Sigmund Freud is considered the father of modern psychology. In order to understand mental processes, he conceived of a 'structure of mind'. The crux of his theory is:

- In the mind of every human being, natural drives are present in their primitive form. They are called basic instincts and form the 'id'—the core of the mind. Hunger, sexual desire, aggression and self-defence are some of these primitive drives. However, unlike animals, civilised people cannot express these basic instincts. All the same, the instincts, being natural, weigh heavily on their mind. Individuals grow up in a family and imbibe the dos and don'ts of behaviour from their surroundings and accept certain ethical rules. The part of the individual's mind that develops in this process is the superego. These two parts of the mind—the id and the superego—are not only distinct from each other, but are actually forces that confront each other, creating tension in the person. But it is not possible for a person to withstand such constant tension. So, a part of the mind has to take responsibility for finding a way (in the shape of behaviour) to keep these two conflicting parts of the mind together by satisfying both to the maximum and hurting both to the minimum. These efforts to maintain accord between these two opponents generates the middle part of the mind, that is, the ego. The ego plays a number of tricks to satisfy both the id and the superego and keep their dissatisfaction to a minimum. These tricks can be positive, or even negative. The sum and substance of this defensive play of tricks shapes the personality of the individual
- We are aware of some happenings that take place in our mind, though we are not constantly aware of all that takes

place there. The part of the mind responsible for this restricted awareness of happenings in the mind is called the ‘conscious’ mind. The things we are not in the least aware of are in the deepest layer of the mind, and are known as the ‘unconscious’. The unconscious mind is full of memories and is a tumult of intense emotions. Think of the outer mind (the conscious mind, the awareness that is manifest) as the top one-eighth of an iceberg seen above the water level, while the hidden, inner mind of which we are unaware is the huge part underneath the surface. Of course, this is only a simile. In reality, the brain is not divided into such distinctive parts. But we do feel this in our day-to-day affairs. For instance, one fine day, we happen to see an individual whom we have not seen for the last twenty years. We have neither seen his photo, nor heard him or written to him. And yet we remember that the individual in front of us was in school with us. Since the twenty-year-old memory could be revived instantly, it must have been secured in our inner mind. The moment this individual shows himself, the memory is retrieved instantly, making us remember happenings of a twenty years ago. This also means that the warehouse of memories that our inner mind is properly organised, and its watchman—our conscious mind—is quite efficient. This warehouse contains everything; all our feelings and emotions, success and failures, joys and sorrows, hopes and despair since our birth up to this moment are stored (or get stored) in the inner mind. We come across many setbacks. We do not get the education that we want, or a good job, or the right life partner; or we face constant bickering at work. We often have to bear all of this silently without disclosing it to anyone else. These memories are all locked inside the inner mind. Now, to continue the simile, we are aware that the goods stored in the warehouse are secure as long as they do not exceed its capacity. Or alternatively, as long as there are no items in it that can explode given even a trivial reason.

Feuds in the family, the untimely death of a family member, sudden loss of property, a serious accident, all of these cause tremendous stress on the mind in any case. But

women are treated as second-class citizens in the family and in society. Basically, their minds are stifled. When, in addition to all this, they suffer other blows, their inner mind exceeds its capacity, and thus, the ability to bear them. Stresses and strains quickly fill the inner minds of individuals who conduct themselves in accordance with the will of others, depend on others for taking decisions and readily accept instructions. The warehouse of their inner mind then begins to overflow. Finding a way to ease the stresses and strains becomes urgent. In rare cases, despite there being no reason for any stress or strain, the individual starts to behave as if she is afflicted. This means that the accord between the outer mind and the inner mind has been lost. When this happens, her facial expression changes; her voice changes and she starts to turn round and round with eyes closed. She locks her hands and starts to puff and pant and gasp in a peculiar way. She shouts, *'Ude ga Ambabai!'* (Hail the deity Amba!). For a while, she transforms into an altogether different person who is unaware of the reality surrounding her and is not even bothered about her clothes. People do not know why this happens and believe that the person is afflicted by a ghost or possessed by a deity.

What is a ghost?

There are two types of ghostly experiences. One is visitation by a ghost and the other is strange behaviour which is supposed to be due to affliction by a ghost. All classes of society, all age groups, men and women, urban or rural, educated or illiterate, rich or poor harbour the concept of a ghost in their minds. We, in India, traditionally believe in the existence of the soul. The disgruntled soul of a dead person leaves his or her body and roams about in a minuscule form and chooses some living body through which it can satiate its unfulfilled. The soul possesses this new person. Plenty of information about afflictions by ghosts is available everywhere. Innumerable books that describe elaborately who was inflicted by which ghost and how are available in the market. They cite mantras that can help you get rid of those ghosts, asking the inflicted person to recite the mantra 1,008

times a day. If the afflicted one is not able to recite, another person should recite it sitting by his or her side. Some water needs to be placed in front of the reciter in a silver or copper vessel, which the afflicted person should drink, remembering his or her family deity, after the recitation is completed. The mantra can also be recorded on a tape recorder, in the voice of a brahmin, and played for the benefit of the afflicted person. Thus it goes on and on.

Everybody has to die one day. But some are murdered and a few commit suicide. Some die suddenly of a severe heart attack. Women sometimes die during labour. The desires of all these people who die a sudden and untimely death remain unfulfilled. So, it is believed that their souls too must be discontented. On being released from their bodies, these souls reside on some tree and try to fulfil their desires. This elaborate concept of 'unsatisfied' souls as ghosts who possess people is embedded in our minds since our early childhood. It is said that not only do ghosts exist, but that there are many varieties, such as Vetal, Khavis, Hadal and Munja. When a woman dies during labour, she, that is, her soul turns into a Hadal. When a brahmin is murdered, he becomes a Brahma Rakshas. A brahmin, hungry for wealth becomes a Brahma Samandha after his death. Ghosts reside in places where people go to fill water, cemeteries, dilapidated old mansions, banyan and peepul trees and suchlike locations. At midnight on the new moon day, they are sure to roam around. The antidote for them is lime, yellow rice, chicken for 'utara', or removal of the ghost. These ghosts do not have heads and their eyes are on their chests. They don't cast a shadow and their reflection cannot be seen in a mirror. They have feet that are turned backwards. If one repeats the name of Rama, they run away. All of this is engraved in our minds since childhood. The illusory ghost plays havoc with us because of the influence the concept of it has on our mind.

There are four reasons why this happens. They are: shams, early impressions on the mind, human suggestibility and the illusions created by our senses. The concept of ghost is the result of any one or more or all of these factors.

The creation of a ghost

People have believed blindly in ghosts for ages. In the twenty-first century, sadly, even the mass media propagates this concept with great enthusiasm. A human being, till he reaches the age of seven to nine years, is not capable of rationally examining whatever knowledge he acquires. During this period, his inner mind gets saturated with information about ghosts through books, from people around and messages beamed by the mass media. All of this information is entrenched in the mind. In short, the main idea that ghosts exist and the rest of the auxiliary ideas regarding ghosts make a deep impression on one's mind. When this information is firmly entrenched in the inner mind, it creates an impediment in one's thinking process. The person may acquire a great deal of knowledge and become a great scientist. But he or she is not able to dig out the wrong ideas and information entrenched in the inner mind, bring them into the conscious mind, analyse them logically, correct inaccuracies and return it to the inner mind for safekeeping. The person is either not able to do so or it does not occur to him that he has to try. In fact, the concepts of ghosts and bhanamati (more on this in Chapter 7) that frighten many of us are fancies of our imagination and should be understood as such by the conscious mind. In addition, it is necessary to get that message into the inner mind too. However, in most of us, our childhood impressions of ghosts and goblins remain intact, unaffected by the rational thinking of the outer mind.

The human mind readily accepts suggestions, and accepts them uncritically most of the time. This becomes clear when one studies advertisements. A certain beauty queen mentions the name of a brand of soap as the secret of her beauty and that soap begins to sell like hot cakes. Let us look at how this happens. Countless women (and men, one must add) accept the suggestion given by the beauty queen's words in their inner minds. The suggestion is that the way to become as beautiful as the beauty queen is to use the soap of that particular brand. Similarly, through common conversations and mass media, stories of houses and human beings plagued by ghosts and incidents of bhanamati are told in such a believable way that they seem like real happenings that have been investigated and proven to be true. Mass media creates this impression for their selfish interest. What they really should do is explain why these stories are

baseless, examine them critically and prove them to be utterly false. The concept of the ghost will then lose its support and eventually vanish.

The third reason for the ghost phenomenon is the illusion caused by our senses. In the dark, mistaking a rope for a snake and being scared of it is a commonly experienced illusion. In the extreme heat of a summer noon, waves of water appear to be flowing over a tarred road. In reality, it is a mirage. When a vehicle speeds up in the dark of the night, the trees and boulders by the side of the road acquire fancy shapes in the vehicle's light. Many times, the causal examination of what is 'seen' is ignored out of fear. In the dark of the night, a figure is seen by the side of the house. Someone from the house comes forward to see who it is. The thief who was hiding behind the wall runs away; and a dog appears on the scene at the same time. The person who has come out may, if he or she is not rational, see the situation as—a dog in place of a man—quite perplexing. Later, he narrates the incident thus to others, 'It was a ghost for sure. It appeared like a man and instantly turned into a dog! I saw it with my own eyes. What more proof do you want?' Now, if the listener too is credulous and uncritical, he will readily accept the wrong suggestion as truth and start the rumour. Or, let's imagine another scenario. Imagine a person wearing stilts and a long skirt over it. If this tall person walks down a street on a dark night, would he or she not create the illusion of a ghost in the mind of the onlooker? If the person seeing the stilt-walker already has the concept of a ghost impressed on his inner mind, he will readily accept this image as such and spread the rumour.

One more reason why people believe that ghosts exist is the vested interest of shrewd and cunning people who use this belief to cheat people, even creating ghosts to exploit them. Many uninhabited old mansions are declared to be infested by ghosts by those who indulge in anti-social activities, so that they have a safe haven that no one dares visit.

Dr Abraham Kovoor, a staunch activist in the movement to eradicate superstitions, through his own experience explains how the susceptible human mind sees ghosts. Kovoor and his wife lived in Richmond Hill in Sri Lanka. His college as well as his residence were situated on this hill. The students' hostel was at the foot of the hill. Once, during his evening walk with his wife,

Kovoor reached the student's hostel. He had a long chat with his students. Various issues were discussed, including ghosts. Kovoor and his wife firmly held that ghosts did not exist. After dinner with the students, Kovoor proceeded home late at night. The students warned him that, on his way back, he would come across a huge banyan tree that was known to be infested by an agyavetal (a dangerous ghost) that appeared in the gigantic forms of various birds and animals and that many had suffered badly at the hands of this ghost. They requested him to rest in the hostel for the night and leave the next morning. Both husband and wife smiled and set out with only a small torch in their hand. On the way, they were talking about ghosts and how even young students believed in them. Eventually, they sighted the dreaded banyan tree at a distance and, all of a sudden, Mrs Kovoor screamed, pointing at something in the dark, 'Look at that elephant.' Kovoor looked in that direction and saw a big elephant standing under the banyan tree even as his wife shivered with fear. Kovoor now faced a dilemma. Should he comfort his wife and proceed further or return to the hostel? Both options were unacceptable to Kovoor. If he went ahead and the elephant attacked them, people would be convinced that the agyavetal had taught a lesson to the non-believer; but if he returned to the hostel, the students would have a good laugh at him. The torchlight was not bright enough to reach the elephant, which was at a distance. But whatever little he could observe, Kovoor realised that the situation was not normal; for the elephant was moving only its left ear and making a funny sound with its mouth. Kovoor thought that the elephant would be accompanied by its keeper. So he shouted as loudly as possible, 'Ay, who is there?' There was no response, except that the funny noise that the elephant was making stopped for a while. Kovoor was not yet sure whether the elephant would retreat. Kovoor again gathered all his energy and courage and shouted, 'Who is there?' Then he noticed some movement. The left ear of the elephant stopped moving and the right ear began to move. A bright white figure dropped out of the right ear and started to walk towards him. Kovoor was able to stay put only because he had spent all his life in the movement against superstition. When the white figure came closer, Kovoor realised that it was a human being. Kovoor asked him in an intimidating tone, 'Who

are you? And what do you intend to do by bringing an elephant here?' The man took a good look at Kovoor and asked in return, 'Do you understand what you are saying? What elephant? Come with me to the tree.' Kovoor went up to the tree with him and noticed a huge vintage black Dodge car. The stranger told him, 'My master had some urgent work and wanted to see the principal of the college, so I brought him here in this car. I am his driver. My master has gone to the principal's bungalow. The car could not climb the steep slope, so I had to stop it here. Keeping the door on the left open, I was resting in the front cabin and dozed off. I was woken up by loud shouts, so I closed the door on the left and got out of the car through the door on the right. Then I walked up to you to see who was shouting. And you are trying to intimidate me? And what on earth is this tale of the elephant? Can't make head or tail of it.'

Everything became as clear as daylight then. Readers, too, will clearly understand how a ghost is created.

- Like everybody else, Dr and Mrs Kovoor had the concept of ghosts ingrained in their minds in their childhood. They discarded this belief later, thinking rationally. However Mrs Kovoor could not eradicate this impression entirely and it still had a bit of influence on her mind.
- In the hostel, students had made the suggestion that the agyavetal appears in various animals' and birds' forms under the banyan tree by the side of the road.
- The suggestion by itself might not have frightened Mrs Kovoor. But the dark night, the dim torchlight and the huge black Dodge created the illusion of an elephant.
- Mrs Kovoor did not perceive the illusory elephant as a ghost. She took it for an elephant and, being scared of wild animals, cried out, 'Look at that elephant there.' Dr Kovoor picked up this suggestion, although it was incorrect.
- The acceptance of this wrong suggestion kicked off an erroneous chain of reasoning. The snoring of the driver became the heaving of the elephant. The left door of the car that had been left open for the breeze and moved to and fro was taken to be the left ear of the elephant that kept moving.
- The driver woke up when Dr Kovoor shouted, and then his

> snoring, that is, the heaving of the elephant stopped. The closing of the door on the left made it seem like the elephant had stopped moving his left ear. The opening of the right door meant that the right ear had then started to move. The driver's getting down and walking towards Dr Kovoor was a very perplexing illusion. Kovoor thought that some white figure had emerged out of the elephant's right ear and was walking towards him.

Had Kovoor not been courageous enough to stay put, or had the driver left without approaching him, Kovoor would certainly have thought that the thing was an elephant and then he would have gone his way. But the students would never have believed Kovoor's story. They would have continued to believe that it was a ghost, and that the Kovoors were very lucky to have escaped from it. But the presence of mind shown by Dr Kovoor provided us with an excellent illustration of how an illusory ghost is created.

Opinions of social reformers regarding ghosts

Many social reformers have written strongly about the concept of ghosts. In ancient times, the Charvakas had investigated this phenomenon. They realised that the idea of ghosts has emerged out of the concept of 'atma'—the soul. They refused to accept the existence of the soul as an entity separate from the body. Our material body, they maintained, is a combination of five elements. The soul does not exist as separate from the living body before or after it is formed. They also refuted the idea of earlier births. About those who spread ideas about ghosts, the saint Tukaram (in the seventeenth century) had said, 'They grow long hair and pretend to beget ghosts in their body; they are neither saints nor is it an indication of soul. They collect gullible people and talk about omens; Tuka says, they all are hypocrites; Govind (Lord Krishna) will never go with them.'

Gopal Ganesh Agarkar, the nineteenth-century social reformer, wrote very bluntly that ghosts and spirits or a soul without a body just do not exist. Then how and why do they occupy our minds? The only explanation can be that the soul and ghosts are accepted just as the existence of Kailash, heaven,

Vaikuntha, Patal, Yama, Yamapuri, Yamayatana and such other conceptual things are believed in. The formless and attributeless supreme god, the soul of a dead person without a body and the ghost are all alike; there is no difference. Once the idea that the soul can exist in two forms—within the body and without—is firmly rooted in the mind, it is not surprising that the relatives of a dead person offers his soul everything he craved in life. For instance, if the deceased is a married woman whose husband is alive, her body is bathed and clothed in a new saree and various rituals are conducted. All our last rites are performed to secure the ascent and residence of the souls into heaven, said Agarkar, and there is no difference between what we offer ghosts to appease them and shraddha rites for deceased ancestors. For Agarkar, the concept of god is not very different from that of the ghost. He says, 'It is wrong to believe that when we praise god, he is pleased and moved enough to help us out of our difficulties or bless us with happiness. Similarly, it is wrong to believe that frequent performance of shraddha rituals will please the souls of the dead ancestors, who then help us, or that repeating the Gayatri mantra and carrying the sacred thread will keep ghosts in check. Further, Agarkar writes, '99 per cent human beings are blind followers. They hate mental exertion much more than physical labour. Even the mind prefers the road much travelled. Most human beings do not want to think for themselves. That is why the concept of the ghost has fixed itself in their minds. We have to get rid of it.'

Ramakrishna Naik from Bijapur had written a book called *Ghost Phantom* in the year 1914. In this book, he argued that ghosts and spirits are but an illusion of the mind. He declared that no bhoot yoni (ghost body) exists in this world. He also declared that all the sightings of ghosts or their tricks that are reported in newspapers, when analysed rationally, reveal a completely different picture. Many seemingly miraculous things happen in nature and it is not possible to immediately explain what caused it. He invited all rational men and women to give up the idea of ghosts as the fear caused by it caused great harm to humanity.

ANiS too, for the same reason, challenges reports of the supposed appearance or tricks of ghosts and use the opportunity to educate people. For instance, we run a challenge that any

individual who can demonstrate a ghost, or show one that can be photographed or get an ANiS activist afflicted by a ghost, will be awarded a sum of Rs 21 lakh. It goes without saying that no one so far has dared accept the challenge.

Hysterical dissociation: a real-life phenomenon

Possession by an unworldly entity and the consequent drama is a common occurrence in our society. Women are possessed on Tuesdays or Fridays, as also on the full moon and the new moon days, and begin huffing and panting. On the eighth day of the Navaratri festival, many women are afflicted; they start breathing into earthen pitchers and become wild and insensible. The loud sound of the halagi and tasha (both percussion instruments) and the appearance of the palanquin of their god seemingly provoke many women to go into a trance. On the day of Datta Jayanti, at certain places or at the time of daily prayers in places like Gangnapur, people supposedly afflicted by ghosts behave strangely, attracting attention. The mischief of ghosts is a permanent feature of Sailani Baba's dargah or that of other pirs (Muslim saints). The visible results of this supposed possession are scary to witness, whether the victim is harbouring a ghost or a deity. The important thing is that the victim is unaware of her own behaviour. She behaves as she imagines the deity or the dead person that has taken hold of her would behave. On regaining consciousness, the afflicted person does not remember what transpired when she was under the influence of the deity or the dead person. This phenomenon is women in our society.

Such temporary loss of control over one's personality and behaviour is called hysterical dissociation in psychology. The phenomenon of being possessed is the outcome of the accumulation of various thoughts, emotions, conflicting opinions and other stresses and strains in the inner mind. The individual herself is unaware of this tension; and the behaviour that helps ease pent-up emotions is mostly not wilful. This is a mild form of mental illness. These symptoms are sometimes noticed in patients of schizophrenia too.

Bhagats, mantriks and devarishis—men and women who indulge in the business of devaski summoning of gods and demons, or exorcising them—exploit this situation. They pretend

to be possessed by some deity and tell people that the illness is the result of an infestation by some fiend. It is necessary to expose the exploitation by these cheats wherever it takes place, by making people aware of the sham and encouraging them to fight it and bring the perpetrators to book. Fortunately, there has been a reduction in the number of these incidents.

What is the reason for this affliction? Suppressed tension could accumulate and cause a temporary breakdown or disintegration of the mind. It is like a dam that is full and cannot hold any more water. When there is yet another downpour, the gates of the dam must be opened to discharge water, else the dam will burst. Similarly, when the reservoir of grief in the mind of an individual is filled to the brim, it will burst. And in India, this happens much more frequently with women. They have to face subordination and insecurity, and not often able to act on solutions to their problems. Whatever cannot be expressed in their wakeful hours—anger against the husband or mother-in-law—is given vent to in a possessed state. The individual who is on the brink of disintegration pulls herself through by these acts of panting and huffing, and muttering.

In psychology, this process is called catharsis.

When the phenomenon of being possessed begins to happen every Friday or on a particular occasion, the members of her family develop respect for her and are now in awe of her. She, who thus far had been treated with utter disrespect, now becomes respectable in the eyes of her husband and in-laws. This brings about a double benefit. It gives the woman some temporary peace of mind and her desire for respect and admiration is also met. Many surveys have revealed that women frequently possessed by deities are those who are neglected in their daily life. Many times, it also becomes a source of regular income for her. Later, it becomes important for the woman to preserve the source of income and newly acquired position. Eventually, the internal conflict that caused the phenomenon of possession in the first place, loses its importance and resolving it becomes secondary. Then, it is the strong urge to be possessed that causes the huffing and panting episodes.

Affliction by a ghost can be compared to the process of hypnosis. It occurs most effectively in a certain atmosphere. If any one of our five sense organs is exercised continuously, a kind

of numbness sets in. A constant, monotonous chant, staring at a flame, inhaling frankincense continually, etc. help an individual lapse into a hypnotic state. Along with this, if the suggestion that Tuesday or Friday and Ashtami or a certain day of the fair are the days when a deity possesses an individual is communicated, it affects the person powerfully. Certain places like Gangapur are famous for this. It is interesting to understand what happens here. Take the example of breathing into pitchers. The Navaratri festival is in full swing. Prayers are being continuously recited, the lights are blinding, a lot of incense is being burnt—all of these create an appropriate backdrop for going into a trance. A big crowd of women is present and they are calling to the deity to possess them. The expectations of the crowd strengthens autosuggestion. And the behaviour of the group loosens the restrictions on the conscious mind, making the process of being possessed all the more easy. Women are already aware that exhaling into pitchers, which is a part of the ritual, goads the deity to possess them. Moreover, inhaling from the pitcher, that is, a closed space, decreases the proportion of oxygen in the blood and increases carbon dioxide. The brain feels giddy, and that takes it to a trance where unusual behaviour comes more easily. This state is very much like hypnosis.

Most of the time, except when used for cheating people, instances of possession are cases of mild mental illness. The first step in treating this illness is to gain the confidence of the patient's family members and explain to them the nature of the illness. They should be educated to look at this affliction not as divine influence but as a mental illness. The family has to be told to stop all poojas, asking questions, throwing coins and so on when the patient is in a trance. When these benefits are discontinued, the patient is no longer being encouraged in their behaviour. The state of trance dissipates for lack of encouragement. The affliction of being possessed may even stop temporarily. But to eradicate it, the patient's problem must be addressed. She needs to receive prestige, respect and love from the family; when this is ensured, there is no need for the affliction. Of course, such willing cooperation from the family is not easy to obtain. Their tradition-oriented psyche is not likely to change by suggestion. Nor is it easy for them to give up the source of income and prestige that is created by the phenomenon

of possession. There are some mild medicines that can be used in the treatment of this illness, but they seldom work if the family does not cooperate.

Hysterical conversion

We have discussed the manner in which an afflicted person takes on a different persona in cases of hysterical dissociation. In hysterical conversion, on the other hand, the patient expresses mental strain through physical symptoms. In this illness, there is no physical impairment or injury whatsoever. But all the symptoms indicate an ailment of the central nervous system. The illness looks grave and causes anxiety.

We express our emotions and thoughts not only verbally but also through our body language. To ask a question, we raise our eyebrows, express our disappointment with a wrinkled brow and shake with rage. On the other hand, we express the effect of mental shocks on the body through apt idioms: to shake in one's shoes, or to gird up one's loins. Hysterical conversion is one such way of expressing a mental conflict as a physical symptom. The patient tries to suppress unbearable or offensive emotions, desires and thoughts. But they get converted into physical symptoms without the patient being aware of it. Mental anxiety finds an outlet through the symptoms of a diseased central nervous system. The patient might become dumb, blind or lame. Or suffer from paralysis, convulsions and unconsciousness. These symptoms seem to indicate some grave illness, and cause family and friends much anxiety. But there is, in fact, no defect of limb or body. And no danger to life. Because mental strain is the cause of the illness, attention-seeking is a symptom of it. And so, the bigger the crowd, the more pronounced the symptoms are. When there is nobody to watch, the symptoms dissipate. Like the hysterical personality, this illness too is seen in reserved and lonely people. Women, especially young women, are more likely to be victims, though it can also be found among men of various age groups. Whether the affliction is really physical or mental can only be determined by a doctor after examining the patient.

Without doubt, the illness is mental and there is no physical impairment, and yet the patient does not pretend; his or her suffering is real. There is a world of difference between someone

who is merely pretending to be ill and a person suffering from hysteria. In hysteria, the patient genuinely suffers from all the manifested symptoms. It is not a sham. The relatives of the patient may misunderstand him or not believe him. In the absence of the patient's cooperation, however, no cure is possible. So, the relatives must handle the patient in a calm manner. A small dose of sodium pentothal, the anaesthetic used in narco-therapy, can be administered. This causes the patient to become partially unconscious, and in a state similar to hypnosis. He is then receptive to suggestion. With this, the symptoms of the illness ought to markedly reduce, but that is not enough. It is necessary to resolve the conflict that is brewing in the patient's inner mind. He needs guidance regarding the thoughts and emotions that surface from the inner mind.

This type of physical illness, and the suddenness of it, often bewilders relatives. The severity of the illness and the absence of any physical manifestation of it confuses them. They take it to be an affliction caused by an 'external' entity and turn to a mantrik (enchanter). Since the power of suggestion can help the patient, a clever mantrik, who is familiar with the patient's background, can help the patient gather his wits and recover. Naturally, this means that the mantrik and his divine treatment will get wide publicity. People are convinced that, since the doctor could not diagnose or cure the problem, and the mantrik could, there must be some supernatural power which is beyond medical science and much more effective than medical treatment.

Mental illness and ANiS

Most of us are ignorant of the mind and its functioning. So it becomes a mystery, one that is deepened by traditional notions of possession by ghosts and deities. Many times, these phenomena are also shams that bring prestige and money. ANiS is active in combating this at all these levels.

Awakening awareness in people is our first step. People are educated about the mind, what makes it ill, and how it can be cured. They are made aware that strain is a fact of life, but that, with care, it need not cause mental illness. But the really difficult role the activist has to play begins here. The afflicted individual is not able to change the situation that causes his strange

behaviour in the first place. Family members and other relatives are of little help. Onlookers in society are either just curious or indifferent. They are neither aware of nor do they feel obliged to understand the problem and help resolve it. In such a situation, the ANiS activist and the scientific approach she brings to the situation can prove very helpful. For instance, if a woman remains childless even after five years of marriage, she is branded as being barren and might thus fall prey to possession. In such a situation, modern science can investigate the reasons for why she is unable to conceive. The couple can be guided and treated accordingly. The ANiS activist, being aware of these possibilities, is called upon to act. Investigation may reveal that the couple is not capable of producing a child for biological reasons. Adopting a child is a good alternative for them. It affords the orphaned child a loving home and the couple the joy of parenting. The ANiS activist can speak to the couple and help them put their resolve into practice. At the same time, the movement exposes the lies of the mantrik. But here activists need to be clear that the work requires perseverance. Also, after exposing the mantrik, they should not boast of their success.

Excepting where it is a case of deception, possession is a mental illness. The afflicted person needs to be treated not with scorn, but sympathy and affection, not with anger, but with compassion. But in case of severe mental illness, although the symptoms are directly related to superstitions, the patient needs to be treated by a psychiatrist. It is important to sense the severity of the illness and the need for special treatment and refer such a patient to a psychiatrist. The activist-worker can then play a supporting role under his guidance.

Symptoms of severe mental illness

Severe mental illnesses are called ‘psychosis’. People with psychosis are disconnected from the real world. At times they spend hours and even days without food, sometimes just sitting in one place without doing a thing. They may even forget to answer the call of nature. At other times, they work continuously much longer than a normal person. Some patients talk to themselves or laugh or click their fingers or whirl. Their countenance changes, their facial expressions change, their voice

changes. In some cases, just before these changes occur, the individual appears to be quite normal. Confronted by these symptoms, people suspect possession by a spirit.

The main symptoms of this illness are illusion and disorder of the mind. Generally, the illusions are of sounds, but other sense organs can also be stimulated. The patient sees a lustrous personality or a fierce fiend, or some other form that his imagination conjures up; he smells sandalwood one moment and rotting garbage at another. Sometimes, the patient feels the soft touch of a caring hand, and the very next moment, he may feel worms crawling on his skin. A message might keep ringing in his, perhaps telling him that he has been selected to deliver the world from harm, or to not take the medicine because it will kill him, etc. None of this is real, but the patient believes in these visions and messages. An example to help explain this better. A healthy person hears a sound. The brain assists that hearing. An engine blows a whistle from a distance and creates sound waves in the air. These sound waves reach the diaphragm in the ear, which then starts to oscillate. The oscillations are converted into microscopic electric messages. A auditory nerves reach this message to the brain. The brain has an ingenious trick. Although the sound is heard by the ear, it appears to have originated not in the ear but in the engine's whistle. In some severe mental illnesses the patient gets the illusion of sound. In cases of severe mental disorder, the affected individual might hear sounds or see images without any external stimuli—the result of changes in brain chemicals. People around them are unable to hear those sounds or see those things. So they murmur in response, answer by waving hands or shout abuses.

During ANiS campaigns, a certain question that carries importance in our culture is invariably asked, 'Many holy men and saints claim to have actually seen god. They are certainly not liars nor are they mentally ill. How can you explain the experience of these great men?' To explain this, we first have to understand the four different ways through which individuals may experience such things.

Intense hypnosis

In self-hypnosis, a person gives himself very intense suggestions,

and consequently, hypnotises himself. It is also possible to be hypnotised through the power of suggestion. If it is suggested to a person in this state that ants are biting him, he starts to kill the non-existent ants. If he is told that his family deity has manifested before him, he accepts the manifestation as real. He prostrates before the deity. He accepts many other suggestions and acts in accordance with them. He eats bitter gourd, relishing it like a bar of chocolate; he enjoys inhaling perfume from a piece of cotton wool with no scent whatsoever. There is nothing mysterious or miraculous in it. All it means is that the person is in a state of hypnosis and that is affecting his perception. A constant or intense yearning can lead a person into a hypnosis-like state. A lover constantly thinking of his beloved feels that he has actually met her. Those who sincerely desire and long for a meeting with their god, and undergo various penances to this end, could easily feel that their god has actually manifested before them. With the deep belief that the guru's favour can enable one to meet god, a devotee has the illusion of actually seeing god at the guru's suggestion. All this boils down to one thing; these are experiences felt in a certain state of mind called hypnosis.

Consuming narcotics

Cannabis, hemp, opium, dried hemp, brown sugar, among others, are all narcotic substances, and deeply addictive. One reason for their addictive nature is that these drugs create illusions that users want to experience over and over. If a devotee believes that he can see his soul after eating the prasad (offering to a deity), and that the soul is sad because it is encased in a sinful body and is sullied due to it, he decides not to commit any sin henceforth. It is not the prasad that enables the devotee to have a spiritual experience. The contents of the prasad should be examined for the narcotics that cause such an experience. Cannabis is known to produce such illusions, and it is customarily consumed on certain days as the prasad of a deity.

The ANiS activist must always be wary as the claims made by an individual are not always due to self-hypnosis, hypnosis by others or the consumption of narcotics. Often, there are con artists and charlatans behind such acts. The bhagat or the baba

(charlatan) sits in front of the deity's shrine and discusses the devotee's problems with her. Then he claims that the deity has whispered into his ear the solutions to those problems. Next, he relates the solutions offered by the deity to the devotee, and collects heavy fees for obtaining solutions directly from the deity. ANiS continually fights such charlatans.

Serious mental illness

Where there is no hypnosis, no deception, and no consumption of narcotics, and yet a person experiences things that are not based on external reality, it is a sign of serious mental illness. The patient firmly believes that the experiences are real. He is not prepared to accept that there is something wrong with him or that he is not well. He thinks that those who advise him to seek help either do not understand his condition or have joined his opponents' camp.

Like illusion, delusion too is a sign of mental illness. These delusions may be on the lines of: someone is bent on doing harm to me, or casting a spell on me and is going to kill me; my wife/ my husband is adulterous; people talk about me, taunt me or laugh at me; I am very wealthy; I am a great man/woman, and so on. Some delusions are manifestly impossible. For instance: someone has established control over my brain and is manipulating my movements or someone has removed my heart from my chest leaving a vacuum there.

Treatment of serious mental illness

Patients suffering from anomalous experiences sometimes approach ANiS, or are brought in by their relatives. They are convinced that there is some afflictive visitation and that ANiS will be able to fix it. But such serious mental diseases ought to be treated by specialists. These days, a number of medicines are available that remedy the chemical changes that have occurred in the brain and restore balance, reducing the symptoms. It takes ten to fifteen days, sometimes a few more, before the effects become visible. When in some cases certain medicines are not effective, the doctor will change the regimen, or try a different combination. The treatment is often lengthy, but the patient's relatives are impatient and want a quick and complete recovery.

Also because they cannot help but wonder if the person is possessed, they also seek the advice of a bhagat, mantrik, baba, devarishi, and other such people. This wavering should be avoided.

Electroconvulsion therapy (ECT) has proved very effective in the treatment of mental illness. However, there are many prejudices—in fact, superstitions—regarding this therapy. Giving electric shocks is supposed to be an outrageous treatment used for incurable madness. However, the reality is different. The patient is completely anaesthetised, as is done in major operations, but only for two to three minutes. Next, a very mild electric shock is administered to the brain. The patient is unconscious for just ten to fifteen seconds after which he regains consciousness and sits up. He does not feel any pain whatsoever, and no part of his body or brain is adversely affected. It is like giving medicines. This treatment is restricted by law and prescribed only if the disease is serious enough. A thorough physical examination of the patient is carried out prior to treatment. So, the risk to life is negligible. Shock therapy does not exclude medicines. The medicines continue. Also, the treatment is not addictive.

Only specialists can treat mentally ill patients. And the role of ANiS here is to combat prejudices regarding the treatment and to prepare people psychologically for availing treatment. As said earlier, in the case of mild illness, it is necessary to remove stress points as far as possible. In case of severe illness, two additional precautions are necessary. Fighting against unscientific treatment and exploitation, and helping the patient get proper treatment are the two things that need attention. In the case of serious illness, the family tends to be more strongly inclined to approach bhagats, and so this temptation needs to be firmly resisted. Equally important is another step. Mental illness is considered a blot on the reputation of the patient. This attitude needs to change, and a positive attitude conducive to the recovery of the patient has to be inculcated. A serious physical illness attracts sympathy but an aggravated mental illness receives only derision. So, it is convenient to call it a fiend's visitation and gain sympathy for the helpless victim. This wrong thinking hides the real ailment in its early stages. When the disease aggravates, the patient is given superstitious treatment. What is needed here is

the awareness and sympathy towards which all sensible citizens should extend a helping hand.

What happens when you approach a bhagat, mantrik or baba?

There are two ways a mantrik treats a mentally ill patient. One way is to blame the deeds of patient's previous birth, his horoscope and the aspect of the planets and other divine things. He will suggest fasts, visits to temples, places of pilgrimages and tombs of pirs. In the second method, the bhagat or baba himself goes into a trance or hypnotises the patient. In this state, the patient is goaded to relate which fiend has visited him and at what time and for what purpose. Then begin the truly vile measures, such as branding with hot rods or burning coal, and beating the patient to oust the fiend. Both these treatments are based solely on superstitions and should be stopped forthwith. Sometimes, however, these remedies of the bhagat bear fruit. People are perplexed. They agree that medical doctors do cure patients. But even a maharaj or mantrik who knows nothing of medicine can cure at least a few patients. Let us, therefore, examine this sporadic success of the babas, as well as the risks involved in approaching them.

- Some mild, even severe, illnesses may get temporarily cured with no medicine. If this happens during the period that the patient is being treated by a mantrik, he gets the credit. As the defence mechanism of the body and the mind kicks in, the patient recovers for a while. Even in some serious cases, the affliction of the patient keeps waxing and waning.
- Previous birth, horoscope and superstitious beliefs are blamed for the illness. This helps reduce the sense of inferiority caused by the notion that one's mind is derailed. The afflicted person can rationalise that he is not to be blamed as it is a bad spirit that is responsible for his illness. This spares the patient's family the blot of madness.
- The babas and buvas in an area happen to be already well-established there. To be under the tutelage of a great guru is a solace to the patient because he believes in the

effectiveness of that baba's blessings.

- The time that a psychiatrist can afford to spend with a patient is limited. He is also required to maintain a professional distance from the patient, and that can be perceived as detached. In contrast to this, the bhagat is prepared to spend plenty of time with the patient and his family. His talk is concordant with their emotional world of beliefs and traditions, which is helpful in the treatment.
- The experience of being heard by a great divine power, and receiving talismans, amulets, charms, antidotes and, above all, the blessings of that power increases the self-confidence of the patient.
- This treatment is invariably coupled with some ritual. When the ritual is carried out, the patient feels that, although a sin was committed, it has been atoned for through the completion of the ritual. His sense of guilt and its symptoms disappear.
- The babas and mantriks create an effective atmosphere in the area where they are supposedly treating the patient. The *Rama Raksha Stotram* (a Sanskrit prayer in the name of Rama) and *Dasabodha* (a seventeenth-century religious text in Marathi by Samarth Ramdas) are recited. The *Gurucharitra* (a fifteenth-century religious text in Marathi by Saraswati Gangadhar) is sometimes recited repeatedly. A kunda—a small metal pot containing holy ash—is kept nearby. People apply the ash to their foreheads with great devotion. Other visitors enthusiastically extol the importance of the holy place and the powers of the baba. Some of them narrate their own reassuring experiences. The orthodox patient finds psychological support in such an atmosphere, which increases the possibility of his recovery.
- Quite a few patients experience visitation during their sessions, which allows their pent-up emotions an outlet. This is called catharsis, or the purging of pent-up emotions.
- In some places where mantriks and bhagats hold court, the patient is beaten to oust the fiend that has possessed him. The beating is justified because it is believed that it is the evil spirit who is being beaten and not the patient. A point may be reached when the patient's mind and body are

exhausted, and in order to stop the beating, he might decide to pull himself up.

In a few mild mental illnesses, or mental shocks that produce seemingly physical symptoms like blindness or paralysis, some so-apparent improvement is noticed due to the reasons listed above. This is then widely publicised. The publicity is necessary for the baba's business. The patient who has recovered a bit also feels important to have received 'divine' treatment. A survey among individuals who offer such treatment reveals that 20 per cent of the individuals who offer this treatment to other mentally ill patients are themselves mentally ill—44 per cent are physically ill, suffering mostly from sexually transmitted diseases, while 12 per cent are wanted criminals or have criminal tendencies. The improvement seen in some cases lasts only for a little while and, in reality, proper treatment is delayed because of this. The possibility that the disease might be aggravated always lurks in the background.

Preventive measures

The government ambitiously proclaimed that it would provide health to all by the year 2000. The deadline is past, but the government stays firm in its commitment. Surely, mental health is an important component of that? So, maybe we should establish what mental health means. Generally, if an eighteen-year-old girl begins to behave in a strange manner, people around her suggest a quick marriage as a remedy for her eccentric behaviour. The mentally disturbed girl is then married and thrown into a totally unfamiliar atmosphere, which is sure to cause her distress, and further deterioration. Then, the opinion is, 'Let her have a child.' During pregnancy, and later while nursing and caring for the child, she is physically and mentally exhausted. The illness aggravates. This is but one instance of our society's ignorance of and disregard for mental health.

These days many families have only one or two children, and parents are anxious about satisfying their child's every desire. It becomes their duty and the child's birthright. But, as the child grows up, in the world outside, his desires are not going to be fulfilled so promptly; rather, they are likely to remain

unfulfilled. He will have to struggle to get what he wants, experience failures and frustration, and be patient. It is necessary to inculcate in him, right from his childhood, the ability to accept small setbacks and denials with grace. This gives him the strength to stomach disappointment and frustration. It is also necessary to develop in him the ability to understand his own problems, articulate them properly and resolve them suitably.

The world, too, has become very competitive and parents push children into the rat race whether they are capable of surviving it or not. This causes great confusion in children's minds, leading to a state of mental disorder. A conscious effort must be made to engage the mind with a positive attitude and constructive thoughts.

How can an afflicted person talk in a strange language that he has never heard before?

An afflicted person may talk in a language totally unknown to him. So, someone who, till then, spoke only Marathi begins to talk in Hindi or Urdu or Bengali or Kannada. Nobody can talk a language without learning it. But the patient, talks in a language he or she has never even heard. This is what the people around him understand (or think), and so it appears to be a mystery or a miracle to them. Now if there happens to be a person, in the surroundings, who spoke this language but died recently, then people conclude that the spirit of that dead man has possessed the person talking in his language. How does this happen?

Let us state clearly here that when a person dies, the cells that form his brain also disintegrate. The impression that his language has made on his brain is also destroyed completely. It cannot transfer itself into another man's brain. To learn a language, one has to hear it. That is why we do not find any afflicted Indian person speaking Chinese or Russian or Japanese. He cannot utter a word of a language he has never heard. A person living in Maharashtra, on being afflicted, will be able to speak only a language that he often hears wittingly or unwittingly. He may be able to speak Hindi, a mix of Hindi and Urdu, English, Kannada etc. Perhaps he came into contact with labourers from Karnataka or another Indian state. Nevertheless, when this so-called mysterious talk is recorded and analysed, the

claim of speaking a strange language fluently falls flat. There is a lot of repetition of words, faulty construction of sentences and speech that is almost meaningless. In reality, what happens is that the person concerned unwittingly receives the impression of a language on his inner mind from his surroundings. For instance, an illiterate woman lives in a small room with her children who are cramming some poems or passages in English. The English words unwittingly get impressed on her subconscious mind while she is busy with her daily chores. Neither does she know the meaning of those words nor is she aware that they have entered her own mind. Due to some events, her conscious mind then loses its hold on her unconscious mind. In this state one similar to hypnosis, she starts uttering the words she picked up unconsciously. For a woman who has never learned English to start talking in the language sounds quite marvellous and mysterious. But when this speech is recorded and played to those who know the language well, it seems bereft of any meaning. The mental state where an individual suddenly starts talking in a language he does not know, is called glossolalia, meaning speech devoid of any sense.

An individual when possessed becomes uncontrollable and cannot be held by ten individuals simultaneously. Isn't becoming so powerful, so suddenly, the evidence of possession?

This is a commonly asked question. The phenomenon of possession is riddled with mystery. People are full of curiosity about the behaviour of an afflicted individual: the way he speaks, his huffing and panting. Since they do not know how the mind works, this appears to be the manifestation of divine power. In fact, every individual has a lot more power than he or she consciously uses. Only in exceptional situations does one use all of one's power or energy. A man walking in the forest is dead tired and does not want to move even an inch. But even in this condition, if he is confronted by a tiger, he will gather all his strength and run away as fast as he can. From where then does he get this energy? A student who is not able to focus for half an hour at a stretch studies continuously for three hours or more as the examinations draw closer. He might begin yawning at 10

a.m. on other days, but studies through the night before exams. When there is a marriage in the family, people work day and night. They feel the fatigue as soon as the function is over and promptly fall into a deep slumber. This (gathering all the energy) is possible with practice and concentration; similar to how trained judo experts break a thick ice slab in just one stroke. But all these abilities have their limits defined by science. In case of the huffing and panting, these limits are decided by the science of physiology. The panting can continue for two or three hours but not the whole day. Similarly, in the case of a possessed woman, it is not true that she cannot be controlled by ten men at a time. If all those ten men hold her hands and feet really tight, it will be impossible for her to move. The reality is that only three or four men dare hold her, and that too, with great apprehension that the deity (or fiend) will be annoyed. When the woman under possession turns and twists and contorts her body, they all withdraw from her and declare, 'It's too powerful, we can't handle it.' Then another batch of men come forward and promptly withdraw, making room for the third batch to try their hand and fail. The hype that even twelve men cannot hold her is thus technically proved, but not really true.

Equally deceptive is another question, 'How can possessed women climb forty to fifty feet up the slippery pole in the Datta temple at Gangapur?' In the first place, these poles are only eight to ten feet tall. Secondly, during possession, the person is oblivious to her surroundings and unmindful of what happens to her. So, even though she slips several times, the woman keeps climbing and eventually reaches the top of the pole. No skill needs to be learned to climb a pole of ten feet; nor is there any supernatural, mysterious or divine power involved in the act. Now, something like riding a bicycle has to be learned. An afflicted woman will not be able to ride a bicycle if she has not learned the skill already. The divine affliction will not help her do this.

The third question generally asked is, 'Why does possession take place mostly on full moon and new moon days?'

It is true that there are comparatively more cases of affliction on these two days. But this does not mean that something

extraordinary has to happen on these two days. The moon is traditionally supposed to be the controller of the mind. It is a widespread belief that, like the ocean, the human mind also feels high or low according to the phases of the moon.

In reality, the human mind and the moon have no physical relationship with each other. But the relationship between the moon and the human mind is firmly rooted in most people's psyche. There are endless efforts to prove that many more cases of dacoity, murder, suicide, rape and other crimes take place on these two days. But no evidence has become available to prove this supposition so far. A similar claim is made regarding the case of affliction in women; and those who have conducted surveys investigating this phenomenon agree with it. Here, the truth of the matter is that women who are prone to be possessed always receive the suggestion that they are likely to be afflicted on these days (or Friday and the eighth day during Navaratri, the days of Ambabai). This notion gets rooted in the suggestible mind of the woman. This creates a situation wherein being afflicted on these days becomes the norm. There have been surveys in some mental asylums of Maharashtra where many mentally ill women are undergoing treatment. They are not aware of what lunar day or week day (or weekend) it is. Some of the women used to be possessed on full moon and new moon days. Now, if the patient is told that the full moon or new moon day was just two days away, then just a day away and finally told that it was the day of the full moon or the new moon, then the woman is sure to get the affliction, no matter what the actual lunar day may be. So, there is no basis for the argument that the fact that more afflictions take place on these two days.

6
Hypnosis

The phenomenon of hypnosis has always baffled us. We are at once curious about it, attracted to it and also scared of it. Some think that it is a sort of bewitching or casting of spells. Others give it a veneer of modernity and advertise hypnosis by inviting people to 'come and become the masters of the wonderful powers of your inner mind!' In well-advertised programmes on hypnosis, individuals carry out the instructions given by the hypnotist. Spectators marvel at it, and are also apprehensive of the power the hypnotist wields over those individuals. Many believe it to be capable of curing diseases and enriching one's personality. All these artifices of beguiling and deluding people made it essential for ANiS to educate people about what hypnosis really is.

All of us are familiar with the state of reverie, daydreaming or trance. A person who is engrossed in reading does not notice a noisy procession that passes by. A person devoted to music is oblivious to all other sounds in his surroundings. This can also be said of the artist who is absorbed in his painting, or a player who is oblivious to the pain caused by injuries while immersed in his game. All these are illustrations of people in reverie. Hypnosis, too, is a state of mind, like sleep, wakefulness, dreaming, unconsciousness and reverie. But there is an important difference between these states of mind and hypnosis. The reverie caused by hypnosis is tied to the suggestions or the instructions of the hypnotist.

The state of hypnosis is a response to the instructions given by the hypnotist. It can also be attained by auto-instruction. It differs from sleep or wakefulness. Like sleep, it is not affected (to a certain extent) by changes in external factors, like light, temperature, or noise. The conscious mind's control over the

inner mind is temporarily suspended. Delusions are experienced by the sense organs in this state.

There are many misgivings regarding hypnosis. They are: to learn hypnosis, one needs to develop spiritual power that requires firm resolve, hard practice and tough penance. The aspirant has to do things like go naked to the cemetery and learn various magic charms and spells. In reality, none of these are necessary. Hypnosis is a state of mind similar to sleep, wherein only the ability to receive suggestions is deliberately kept alert. This partial alertness is coupled with suggestions given by the hypnotist or by the individual himself. The mind's critical faculty is held in abeyance during this state. Any monotonous excitation of the senses brings the individual's sense organs together. Long, deep rhythmic inhaling and exhaling, monotonous chanting of mantras, staring at a shining object or a flame or a point, the sound of drums, dancing, huffing and panting, listening to a monotonous speech or a lullaby, fixing the sense organs on one object—with such actions, the individual attains the state of hypnosis. Yet, the part of the brain that is reacting to suggestions is still awake like a watchman. This part executes all the actions. The existence of any spiritual power has not so far been proved and is not required to learn hypnosis. Anyone can learn hypnosis.

The history of hypnosis

Dr Franz Anton Mesmer (1734–1815) used to treat his hysterical patients with a mysterious sleight of hand or legerdemain. This method was named after him as 'Mesmerism'. This technique of treating patients caused a lot of curiosity and also an uproar in the field of medicine in those days. A committee was appointed in France to investigate his claims. The committee concluded that no such power known as 'animal magnetism' (which is what Dr Mesmer termed it) existed, and that the claims made by Dr Mesmer about this technique were highly exaggerated.

Dr James Bred of Manchester (1815–60) proved through his research that no animal magnetism was required to mesmerise a patient. According to him, it was a state of artificially induced sleep that involved exhausting the nervous system. So, in 1843, mesmerism was renamed hypnotism. Hypnos, in Greek mythology, is the deity of sleep. However, hypnosis is not sleep.

There is much controversy all over the world regarding the use of hypnosis. In some countries, stage performances of hypnosis for entertainment are banned; they are considered to be deception. In modern times, hypnosis is only occasionally used, and that too, as a minor therapy in treating mental illness. In some countries, doctors demand that even this insignificant use of hypnosis in medical treatment be strictly regulated. Whatever is claimed to be achievable through hypnosis can also be achieved by other means more effectively. Many doubts have been raised about hypnosis all over the world, which have not been countered satisfactorily by practising hypnotists. All these facts should demystify hypnosis and highlight the need to critically study this phenomenon for the good of society.

Hypnosis: understanding–misunderstanding

There is a prevalent belief that a person can be hypnotised, abducted and then defrauded of his precious belongings. On investigating several such cases, only one conclusion can be drawn. All instances of hypnosis are primarily self-hypnosis. No individual can be hypnotised against his wish. To be hypnotised, an individual has to keep accepting suggestions and with great concentration for a long time. No one is likely to grant a stranger that kind of time and energy. Women and children are unlikely to agree to stare into the eye of the stranger in this manner, and accept his suggestions. So most laims of hypnosis are lies, plain and simple.

The truth behind such episodes is likely to be that the individual concerned either loses his money or squanders it on addiction. Perhaps he ran away because of unhappiness at home. On his return, he is not able to explain the loss of money or his absence. Then comes the concocted story: A stranger stared into my eyes and I lost my wits; I followed him . . . He took away whatever I had . . . and so on. People are convinced; and he adds, ‘I don’t remember anything of what happened until I came back.’ After hearing this story, gullible relatives and onlookers sympathise with the cheat and thank god he has returned safe and sound. Media people are, unwittingly or for the sake of a ‘sensational story’, also responsible for spreading this misunderstanding. Propagating a lie in this way is certainly

irresponsible.

Another misconception about hypnosis is that a person with a weak is easily hypnotised while a strong-willed person can resist hypnosis. The reality is just the opposite. People with a weak will are not curious by nature; they are unlikely to concentrate on the suggestions of the hypnotist. That is why mentally ill patients, children, individuals with a negative attitude or overcritical and obstinate persons are difficult to hypnotise, for they are engrossed in their own thoughts. Those with a strong will, who are willing to learn something new, who cooperate with the hypnotist are, on the other hand, prone to being hypnotised.

One more misunderstanding is that the hypnotist can get the hypnotised person to do his dirty work. Public displays of hypnotism spread this misapprehension, because the performer makes his hypnotised 'victims' do innocent but ridiculous things like mistaking a piece of paper for a biscuit or shooing away non-existent ants or such-like strange things. This is possible because, during that interval, the hypnotised person has temporarily lost the ability to think critically. However, he cannot be made to act against his will. For one, no one will be willing to get hypnotised unless he has faith in the hypnotist. And secondly, even under hypnosis, if the hypnotised person is given a suggestion contrary to his will or values or something life-threatening, he is likely to refuse to act in accordance with the suggestion or wake up. That is why a hypnotised atheist cannot see god and an individual will not start abusing parents he respects even if he is told to do so. Girls from rural backgrounds, who are brought up with the idea that dancing is only for girls who act in rural stage shows and those who are not from good families, will refuse to dance during hypnosis. Those who believe that to steal is immoral or a sin will not steal even if told to do so during hypnosis. Similarly, no one is likely to accept the suggestion that they sign a cheque and give away their money to the hypnotist.

There is another misconception too: that a person will reveal what is hidden in his subconscious during hypnosis. Every instance of hypnosis depends on the cooperation of the person being hypnotised. He will reveal only those things he wants to reveal, but is not able to do so, out of fear or pressure during his wakeful hours. For instance, in cases of hysteria, during

hypnosis, a woman might vent about ill-treatment by her in-laws; but the same information can be obtained in her wakeful hours if she is assured of a sympathetic hearing and the resolution of her problems. Thus it cannot be said that this will happen only during hypnosis. If assured of release, an inexperienced culprit will blurt out everything about the crime he has committed. But if he knows that the information he is asked to reveal will result in punishment or pose a threat to his life, he will not reveal anything, hypnosis notwithstanding.

Many people believe that it is possible through hypnotic suggestion to go further and further back in one's memory until one remembers a previous birth. This claim is utterly false. The process of remembering is corporeal—firmly rooted in matter. We can only remember experiences that are recorded in our brain. Since going back into the past does not involve any danger, the hypnotised person may be able to relive his childhood. He performs acts appropriate for that stage in his life; he dances as a college student would; he recites tables like a schoolchild would; he walks on all fours and drinks milk like an infant would. Thus, during hypnosis, he performs what he thinks is suitable for those stages of his life. But that does not mean he behaved exactly like that as a child or young man. In fact, every one of us has certain ideas about how a person behaves, speaks, writes at certain stages of life, and the hypnotised person is merely acting that out during his session. The claim that the memories of a person's previous life can be extracted from him while he is in a state of hypnosis is similarly baseless. What he narrates about his earlier births is a figment of his imagination, although no deliberate deception may be intended. If a part of the brain is damaged, the memories stored in that part vanish completely and cannot be retrieved even through hypnosis. Naturally, when a person dies, his brain along with the memory stored in it is destroyed. So the claim that hypnosis retrieves the memories of previous births is utterly false. Detailed investigations prove that the concept of rebirth itself is a play of the mind.

A magician hypnotises a girl during his show. He makes her body so stiff that it can be balanced on the tip of a sword; he grabs the children in the audience without their parents being aware of it and produces them from a box on the stage; he rides

a motorbike with his eyes blindfolded; he makes the watches of everyone in the audience show exactly the same time. Since we are ignorant of the ways of magic and of the modern gadgets and appliances that are used in its performance, all of us, educated and uneducated alike, are convinced of the existence of hypnotic power. But no magician has ever claimed to possess any such power. It is the ingenious use of sophisticated techniques and appliances that help them create illusions. P.C. Sorcar (Junior), who whisks away a whole train in front of the audience, openly declares that it is not mass hypnotism but skilful use of modern technology. Magical exploits look real because of the cooperation of those involved, the use of ingenious techniques and the make-believe created by clever words and lighting arrangements, and not because of any divine power. To reveal the secrets of these performances to laymen goes against the ethical principles set up by the international union of magicians. But those who are interested in learning magic can do so at magic schools in Mumbai and Kolkata.

The fear that a hypnotised person may remain in that state forever if the hypnotist leaves is also without reason, because hypnosis is like sleep that is connected with the suggestions of the hypnotist. The rapport between the hypnotist and the hypnotised breaks down when, for whatever reasons, suggestions from the hypnotist cease. The hypnotised person wakes up or goes into a natural sleep and wakes up as usual after his sleep is over. Nobody has ever remained hypnotised because the suggestions to wake up were not properly administered.

Autosuggestion

A person can also hypnotise himself through self-instruction. Some people believe that self-hypnosis is the panacea for all difficulties and frustrations. Just go into autohypnosis and give yourself instructions to overcome all your problems and lead a life full of confidence and joy. Books on autohypnosis are replete with such tall claims.

There is no evidence to prove that self-instructions are beneficial, or that they are more effective when given in the hypnotic state. All that we can say is that some people do appear to benefit from self-instruction. The fundamental precondition is

that the person should analyse his problems himself or with the help of others. Just giving yourself suggestions—like reduce your weight, give up drinking, headache will vanish, you will feel happy—during either wakefulness or hypnosis, will not help. What is needed is an understanding of the problems and an analysis of their nature and causes. After understanding the problem and finding a practical solution, one has to decide on the proper suggestion that it is to be given to the self. For example, if the problem is obesity, the reasons for it, like overeating, lack of exercise, heredity, defect in metabolism, overeating to reduce mental stress, ought to be analysed and the reasons pinpointed. Suggestions given to the self during self-hypnosis without such analysis will prove useless.

The so-called experts in this field claim that when all the preconditions of self-hypnosis are fulfilled, a fundamental and lasting change can be made in the personality by giving self-suggestions while in the state of hypnosis. This popular claim needs to be examined. The advocates of self-hypnosis ignore a very important reality—social circumstances. The suggestion, 'You are happy, satisfied, and joyful', whether given by the self or a hypnotist is not going to make you happy. For that, a favourable basis of material reality is essential. Hypnotism will not remove the difficulties of, say, fighting for water every day at the common municipal tap, or walking several miles every day to fetch drinking water. It is of no use to the educated youth who is not able to find a job.

Hypnotism experts often argue that, since it is not possible for an individual to bring about changes in the social reality, he should accept it and try to ameliorate his lot by hypnotic self-suggestion? This path, even though it may prove effective at times, is one of escapism, of fatalism, or 'buvabaji'. The real struggle for social reform, the search for real remedies, is deferred. That is why ANiS, which is committed to comprehensive social reform, has to oppose self-hypnotism and its so-called quick remedies.

Autohypnosis

When we visit a hypnotist, we accept suggestions from him or her and act accordingly, because we are mentally prepared for

that. We are confident that help is available whenever needed. The atmosphere there is deliberately made conducive to hypnosis. But when this person turns to autohypnosis, he has to be well motivated and should have no doubt in his mind regarding the process, nor should there be any stress on his mind. It seems a little difficult, but with some practice, one can easily hypnotise oneself and also benefit from it.

Autohypnosis is generally defined as an internal process wherein concentration and focused awareness of the mind is heightened and, therefore, receptiveness to suggestions of positive change also increases.

Before practising autohypnosis, we should be clear about our objective for doing it. Personal ambition, a successful interview, learning a new skill or art or language, playing a musical instrument, knowing oneself better or understanding the reasons for one's rage—the suggestions to be made in autohypnosis will vary with the reason.

Auto-hypnosis is easier when practised somewhere that is comfortable. A quiet room, dim light, loose clothes, pleasant atmosphere and a stomach that is neither full nor empty—all these are conducive to autohypnosis.

To understand what suggestions to work with under autohypnosis, the person can either think it through critically himself, or approach a psychiatrist, or a senior person who knows him well and cares about him. In this process, it is essential to thoroughly examine the nature, abilities, the present condition and the surroundings of the person who intends to undertake autohypnosis.

Divine vision and hypnosis

There have been many claims of divine visions or divine voices all over the world. At least a few of those who claimed to have witnessed a divine manifestation are known to be great saints or sadhus. Their experience is offered as proof of the truth of divine manifestation. What is the reality? Let us investigate further.

The divine manifestation experienced by saints and sadhus is, in fact, a state of hypnosis. Intense devotion to god, an earnest longing to meet him, being engrossed in singing or the recitation of prayers, worshipping and performing kirtan (musical rendition

about the lives of deities) are all factors that together produce autohypnosis in a saintly person; he then feels that he has been blessed by the manifestation of god. Since this person happens to be pious and ascetic by nature, people believe in what he avows.

Hypnosis helps to explain the psychology of this process of divine vision. A person in a state of deep sleep induced by hypnosis sees his family deity on being given a suggestion to that effect. Then he fixes his eyes on the deity with great devotion, bends down before it and gives an interesting account of his experience while still under the influence of hypnosis. In case this person is given a suggestion that he is the baby Krishna walking on all fours in Gokul (the place where Krishna is said to have spent his childhood days), he starts to do that; if he is told to lick the butter on his lips, he does so. This experiment reveals the psychological truth of the phenomenon of divine vision. Awakening of the kundalini, sahajyogasadhana, performances of 'experiencing the subtle', are all various manifestations of similar hypnotic states. The surroundings are deliberately made conducive to hypnosis, with a pleasant atmosphere, soft music, devotional songs or prayers, and at times, asking the individual to concentrate on a flame, a photo or an idol. To induce hypnosis, an individual is given appropriate suggestions as part of the ceremony. Other measures are taken to influence those who remain unaffected by these contrivances. All this is only hypnosis in the garb of religiosity used to produce divine manifestation.

Rebirth and hypnosis

Remembering is a purely physical process. Only those things or experiences that have made an impression on the brain can be remembered. The brain disintegrates after death; it is destroyed when it is burnt or buried. It is not possible that any memories can be transmitted into the so-called next birth. Even in this birth, if memories are contained in a portion of the brain that is damaged, they are lost, and hypnosis cannot retrieve them. To prove that something (like the memories of a previous birth) exists, it is necessary to prove that it can be sensed by our sense organs.

A suggestible individual, in order to fulfil the expectation of

the hypnotist, might relate imaginary things about his so-called previous birth in a hypnosis session. This state is called 'cryptomnesia'.

An individual collects information through various media but forgets the source of the information after some time. When such information is revealed during the state of hypnosis, it could appear mysterious. Traditional hypnotists, who try to investigate previous birth through hypnosis and believe in the cycle of birth, death and rebirth, the soul, etc. are amateur hypnotists. Neither are they educated in medicine, nor do they have a scientific outlook. They handle superficially and declare that the phenomenon is valid. In the investigation of the cases, it is necessary to interview the person over a long time and videotape these interviews. Ideally, only psychiatrists should investigate or cross-examine such cases.

An authentic case where some historical evidence of previous life is available should be investigated and verified. What is worth noting here is that the discrepancies, mistakes and ridiculous things observed during the investigation are never given any publicity whatsoever.

The most famous case of this sort is that of Arnold Blocksham's claim. He hypnotised many individuals, and while they were still in that state, led them into their so-called previous birth. None of them remembered any of the details of their previous births when they were conscious again. A number of people saw this on the BBC channel. No one doubted its authenticity. Consequently, it was touted as evidence of the reality of rebirth. Thereafter, Dr Edwin Zolik of the University of Marquette investigated the phenomenon. He hypnotised a number of people, suggested that they enter into their previous birth and compiled all the information they revealed. He then woke them up from their hypnotic state. None of them had any information regarding the previous birth that they described during hypnosis. These individuals were then hypnotised once again. Now they were asked to go back to their past experiences step-by-step and reveal how they got the information (supposedly of their previous births). All of them recalled the pictures they saw, the books they read and the conversations they had heard, all of which they had earlier described as the events of their previous birth. These memories coloured in the

hues of their own emotions created the so-called previous birth and its memories. Dr Campman, head of the Psychology Department of the Oulu University of Finland, conducted similar experiments, the findings of which supported the conclusion arrived at by Dr Zolik. People who had participated in Bloksham's experiment were invited for a further round of investigations in the light of the new evidence. All of them, including Blocksham himself, refused the invitation.

ANiS considers it its duty to refute all exaggerated claims made about hypnosis and also to spell out the limitations of the form. For instance, a person is laid horizontally on two chairs. He is shown to be able to balance his own body thus, and also a man standing on his chest. This fact is used as evidence of how stiff the body can be made during hypnosis and the power of hypnotic suggestion. In fact, anybody can do this with the help of autosuggestion and determination without being hypnotised. ANiS wants to demystify hypnosis, present it as a state of mind and satisfy curiosity about it, both by explaining what it is and by training those who are interested in the phenomenon.

Personality development is not something that can be learnt in two or three days, like origami or birdwatching. It is a lifelong process. Self-examination, detecting and correcting one's faults and nourishing one's virtues are not behaviours that can be learnt in a workshop and then put into practice. Personality is shaped by people's experiences, and is affected by their physical, social and mental characteristics.

To enrich our personality, we need to understand our own faults and virtues, good and bad habits, communication skills, mental make-up, emotional equilibrium, inferiority complex, level of thinking, abilities and limitations well enough to overcome our drawbacks and limitations.

Lack of self-confidence creates an inferiority complex. When a person analyses the causes of one's lack of confidence and becomes aware of his own physical, mental and economic potential, he can build his self-confidence with his own efforts. But without making any such effort, a mere autosuggestion—my self-confidence will increase—in a hypnotic state will produce no results. On the other hand, if honest efforts are made to analyse the causes of one's inferiority complex, find solutions to overcome them and make changes in behaviour, there would be

no need for hypnosis. It is of very limited use in such situations.

Most of those who conduct classes or workshops on hypnosis do not explain to participants what personality means and how to enrich it. They claim that hypnotic suggestions can help reduce obesity, get rid of insomnia or addiction, get rid a person of inferiority complex. Such superficial measures are not only useless but also unethical. They advertise their programmes inviting participants to 'increase your memory, increase your intelligence with hypnosis'. Now the ability to grasp, imagine and think critically and the energy to endeavour to achieve one's objectives together constitute intelligence, and it is a common and natural ability of human beings. Concentration of the mind means concentrating attention on something or some thought. Physical ailments, noisy surroundings, pressure, feelings of insecurity and uncertainty are some of the reasons that make concentration difficult or impossible. So what is needed is to identify the reasons and to remove or reduce their effects or avoid them. In the absence of such analysis, a hypnotic session will do no wonders.

Hypnosis classes also claim that it can increase memory through these sessions. This is, of course, deceptive. Memory has to be constantly used to nurse one's ability to remember. To suggest otherwise is plain trickery and cheating. The common man proves an easy victim of this deceit. At the time of an examination, if one allows the body to relax, the strain on one's mind reduces. This reduction in strain helps in remembering things much better. For a remedy to work, in the first place, it needs to be connected with the centre of memory in the brain. In the process of hypnosis, nothing of this sort can take place and, therefore, there can be no improvement of memory.

Hypnosis: the modern 'buvabaji'

There is no recognised degree, and no Indian university has yet introduced an independent course in hypnosis. So classes on hypnosis are conducted purely on the basis that those who conduct these classes can hypnotise people.

All over the state of Maharashtra, there are people for whom hypnosis is their bread and butter. They portray hypnosis in the bright colours of great utility and modern psychiatry in order to

protect their professional interests. This deceit is more dangerous than it appears.

A typical advertisement runs thus: ‘Be the masters of the wonderful powers of the inner mind. The power of autohypnosis and autosuggestion is immense, you can get rid of your frustration and anxiety and overcome your inferiority complex. You will leave your despair, anguish and problems behind and find hope, joy and progress.’ And mind you, this is not just an advertisement seeking professional engagements, but also what they advocate through their speeches, articles and books.

Really speaking, in order to treat every grievance mentioned above, it is necessary to investigate sympathetically the reasons that caused them. Such investigation requires training in certain skills. It is not proper to treat or guide people just because one is able to hypnotise other individuals; this is cheating them. Let us consider just one disorder—addiction to liquor—to illustrate how misleading these claims are. The claim that hypnosis can cure alcoholism is an indication of the ignorance that prevails regarding the nature and causes of addiction. Addiction is now considered a mental illness and treated accordingly. The US had, years ago, initiated a movement to eradicate addiction and spent billions of dollars on it. It failed utterly, and finally, the programme was withdrawn. This is recent history. If hypnosis is such a sure remedy, how is it that the American government did not think of it? The treatment for addiction is discussed in books written by eminent psychiatrists. None of them mention hypnosis as a part of the treatment. Practising hypnotists should pay attention to this fact.

Professional hypnotists make claims like these: ‘Hypnosis is the most powerful device in the development of personality. Innumerable ways of developing personality have been tried, but none have proved as effective and as convincing as hypnosis. Hypnosis can bring about unprecedented changes in personality, removing the existing faults. The mind experiences joy with an increase in enthusiasm and motivation for accomplishments. Communication with people becomes effortless and effective. People can be impressed easily. In short, hypnosis makes you a “complete” person.’ This is a long list of benefits. What more could any human being need? But alas! This is only deception by unscrupulous elements to trap gullible common people.

These days, the manner in which supernatural powers are ascribed to any object or discipline is by extolling it as a boon to humanity, a cure-all. This is what professional hypnotists do. They claim that hypnosis is a sure cure for warts, psoriasis, diabetes, asthma, gout, rheumatism, blood pressure, headache, insomnia, chronic dysentery, colitis, indigestion, various ailments of the digestive system and seventy-two other ailments. And since hypnosis increases the individual's immunity, it enables him to fight any disease and also control all maladies, they claim. This is nothing but buvabaji.

Undoubtedly, correct diagnosis is the basis of all treatment. To treat a headache, we need to know the cause of the headache; whether it is due to a tumour, cold, hypertension, poor eyesight or mental stress. How is it possible to arrive at a correct diagnosis, knowing only hypnosis and no medicine? To treat headache with hypnosis without a proper diagnosis, without knowing the cause of it, is a grave mistake. Hypnosis might possibly reduce a problem temporarily, but in this temporary relief itself lies the risk. For, during that period, the tumour in the brain might grow and the patient would lose the benefit of the timely treatment he would have had if he had approached a doctor instead of a hypnotist. Should one then go to a hypnotist after ensuring that one's headache is not a physical illness but a mental? Here again, as long as the reason for the mental stress that is causing the headache is not discovered, it is not possible to determine exactly what suggestions will work in hypnotic treatment, making recovery difficult. The first step in the treatment ought to be to determine the exact cause: whether it is due to the strain of office work, or constant bickering at home, or worry about children's careers, or noise from a hotel nearby. This obviously is the job of a psychiatrist or clinical psychologist. The fact that a few individuals feel some relief does not make the approach scientific, nor does it justify it. This is why hypnosis is not even mentioned in textbooks of medicine for any of the above ailments. It has little or no place in the ongoing research on any of these diseases. At most, it may find a place as a supplementary measure like diet, exercise, adequate sleep, or long walks.

'Hypnosis is all benefits and no loss. It leads us from bad to good, from failure to success, despair to hope, from good to best

with ease.' As if this claim is not tall enough to attract all and sundry, professional hypnotists augment it with socio-philosophical concerns that they claim hypnosis can successfully address: 'The individual as well as society constantly endeavour for comfort and contentment. Hypnosis can create this much-needed contentment and comfort in the individual's own brain; and every individual and the society they make can lead a joyful life. Happy individuals make a happy society.'

All this boils down to one thing and that is the assumption that a person's brain can be conditioned to become happy. The assumption that society can be led along the path of happiness regardless of the prevailing social realities is no less superstitious than the determinist attitude that one ought to be happy without any creature comforts. Nirmala Mata, Mahesh Yogi, Prajapita Brahmakumari, all give the same message. The meditation and contemplation that they advocate are more or less the procedures adopted by hypnotists. They too claim to be leading human beings on the path of ultimate felicity, supreme bliss and tranquillity, which is just what the hypnotists claim too just like those made by hypnotists. The hard reality of today's social life could devastate an individual's life. The dark shadow of unemployment, ever-rising prices, stiff competition, communal riots, corruption and other societal ills have engulfed the life of individuals and society and is eating into it like termites. Neither determinists (adherents of determinism) nor hypnotists utter a word about these maladies, instead inviting people to join the pilgrimage of happy life through hypnosis. Is this not escapism and cowardice? What support can hypnosis provide to a family that cannot make two ends meet? Will a sane individual, whose mind is strained because of the prevailing violence, cruelty and indifference of those in power and immorality all around, really be able to rejoice in the bliss of hypnosis?

Shrewdly, these people ensure that these awkward questions don't occur to anyone, and that, in any case, hypnotists are not held responsible for answering them. They have a list of 'supporters' of hypnosis, which they place before the client. Names of prestigious organisations, such as the British Medical Association and the American Medical Association, and well-known books such as *Psychiatric Handbook No. 2* and *Encyclopaedia Britannica* find mention in that list. But what these

people have actually said about hypnosis is not revealed. The American and British Medical Associations, while recognising hypnosis as a therapy, have clearly mentioned that it should be used with great discretion; the therapist should be a medical person and trained in hypnosis. The remarks in *Encyclopaedia Britannica* are unflattering and openly critical of hypnosis.

The main points of criticism are:

1) Although hypnosis is founded on direct experience, not a single explanation of the theory that is acceptable to all has, as yet, been made available.
2) The claim that hypnosis increases memory is debatable and not undeniably proved.
3) That the physical ability, comprehension, learning ability and productivity of a person increase while he is hypnotised, as compared to his abilities during his wakeful hours, is simply impossible. Similarly, making a person do something during hypnosis which he is not able to do while awake is also not possible.
4) Hypnosis is not especially useful for recollection or memory. Motivating a person by other means is equally, perhaps more, effective than hypnosis.

So those who pay hefty fees to attend a three-day hypnosis workshop, hoping to improve their personality, progress from despair to hope and sickness to health are misled. The important arguments the hypnotists proffer to counter complaints are: 'The benefits of this process depend on the attitude of the learner, his comprehension and his regular and correct practice.' Is this any different from the shrewd baba's argument, 'You fail because you are not reciting the mantra adequately and appropriately every day, and it won't work if you don't have faith in me!'

ANiS is fully aware of the need to synchronise its work with the broader social, economic and political reform movement. Hence, it undertakes activities to supplement the basic work of other movements for social change. It exposes publicly the real nature of superstitions through scientific analysis. ANiS also tries to enable people to stick to reason and values, and with this live a fearless and joyous life. Opposing the activities of these selfish people who cast spells or indulge in pseudoscientific hypnosis is

the main purpose of the ANiS movement.

7

Bhanamati: Black Magic

Primitive humans were bewildered by the phenomena they observed around them. Hence, they reasoned that there must be some power, some yatu, that is, magic. They felt it necessary to worship this power. This was how magic-religious beliefs originated. (Yatu later became 'jadoo' or 'jadu' in colloquial speech). Yatu kriya—magic-religious rituals—performed for favourable and promising outcomes, like adequate rain, plentiful crops or several sons, are called 'shukla yatu' or white magic; while those performed with wicked intentions, like getting hold of a neighbour's stock of grain through magic, rendering a rival's wife barren, or causing the enemy to die of vomiting blood, are called 'krishna yatu', 'bhanamati' or black magic. In the twenty-first century, the nature of natural phenomena have been widely explored and understood, leading to a loss of belief in the phenomenon of bhanamati. But it still exists, although not in its original form.

In rural areas, people quarrel among themselves because they suspect that bhanamati—also called 'karani' or 'jadutona'—was involved. In most cases, the concerned parties do not bother to investigate the causes of the untoward incidents. For instance, a man's house is pelted with stones. The pelting continues despite the presence of a policeman. Clothes from the house get torn or burnt; containers fall off the shelf on their own; things drop out of the cupboard even when its doors are shut; and some member of the family develops small black crosses on their skin. The dinner plate is sprinkled with ashes, or the food tastes very salty or very bitter. Sometimes, schoolgoing kids find stones in their eyes or ears. All these mysterious incidents create fear in the minds of the affected people, and they come to believe that

there exists a power that disregards scientific laws. A superficial investigation fails to find their source, causing further unease. What they are experiencing—whether stone pelting, food becoming salty, or the tearing of clothes—is undoubtedly scary and causes anxiety.

In the Marathwada region of Maharashtra, a woman's possession by a deity is labelled bhanamati. Such women huff and pant, talk gibberish, roll on the ground and bark like dogs. Quite often, the affliction spreads and many women are similarly affected. This is a kind of mental illness. ANiS has been active in this region for the last twenty years, and the number of such incidents has reduced considerably. In addition to possession by a deity, other kinds of bhanamati are also on the decline, and what is more important is that people are now mentally prepared to approach ANiS activists or even the police. However, such incidents are highly newsworthy and subjects of curiosity in the public imagination. Quick intervention in all these incidents, therefore, becomes essential.

The bhanamati incidents are always mysterious and scary. Nothing beneficial, like striking water when digging a well, or winning a lottery, or having a child, ever happens due to bhanamati. There are a number of falsehoods that are believed about the person supposed to be afflicted by bhanamati, such as, she sits in the recess of a wall or on a peg; she dangles from a peg by her hair; or needles, nails and such items come out of her head, nose and ear.

The afflicted person's family acquaintances sympathise with them, take pity on them and feel curious about the mystery. But no one knows the cause of bhanamati and how to stop it. They are not sure that no supernatural power exists. People are prone to exaggerating what they know regarding bhanamati incidents, lending the rumours more vigour and strengthening the myth.

A proper investigation into bhanamati incidents reveals that the individuals involved are frustrated, unsuccessful or held in contempt by others. They are not capable of accepting their failure and frustration for which they may not really be always responsible. What they need is sympathy, which they do not get by legitimate means from an insensitive society. Then they resort to attracting people's attention by pretending to be in deep trouble due to harassment and affliction. Those who indulge in

bhanamati act both surreptitiously and consciously. Sometimes, however, the individual is unwittingly led to indulge in these deeds by the strong urge of her unconscious mind. Such individuals are psychologically maladjusted. Bhanamati is peculiar in the sense that, although the incidents of bhanamati, on the face of it, appear to be troublesome, they are not so in reality. Though the clothes on the body catch fire, the person involved does not suffer burn injuries. Things from closed cupboards get scattered around, but they are small insignificant things like coins and handkerchiefs, never precious jewellery. Things do disappear but are invariably and promptly found. This shows that the individual who indulges in bhanamati is fully conscious of what she is doing.

Exposing bhanamati

While investigating an incident of bhanamati, one should firmly hold on to the simple scientific theory that nothing can be moved even a millimetre from its spot without the application of physical force. Nothing happens without a cause. Stones are not pelted from nowhere. A human hand ought to be present in every such occurrence; every ingenious act involves some chemical, biochemical or mechanical tactic or ploy. People often try to investigate bhanamati under a mystic garb, and declare it to be the work of some 'outside supernatural agency'. To eradicate bhanamati one has to expose the hand behind it, for which a critical mind and logical thinking are essential.

ANiS activists have so far exposed more than two hundred 'hands' involved in cases of bhanamati. Anyone with the ability to think clearly and observe shrewdly and carefully can do it. ANiS has developed a well-defined method for this purpose as described below:

- When the members of a family afflicted by bhanamati approach ANiS activists for help, they are asked to make a written undertaking to the effect that henceforth the family will not invite any witch doctor for treating the menace, and that ANiS will be given full cooperation by all the members of the family. Also, all instructions given by ANiS will be meticulously followed. ANiS activists also obtain

permission from the family to approach the press or the police if need be. Details of all incidents related to bhanamati that have taken place in the house since the bhanamati affliction was first noticed are noted down. (For example, when, where, and at what time did the incidents take place; did anybody witness them while they happened; who brought in the information regarding the incidents; what precaution was taken to prevent the recurrence of the incidents; were those precautions of any help.)

- It is made clear to the family that when ANiS activists begin the investigation, they will have to interview each and every person in the family, including women and young girls independently and in a closed room.
- The investigating team are a small group of only four to five members. It includes one elderly woman. It is decided in advance who should interview the members of the family, avoiding interference by other team members. The interviews are audio-recorded. Starting from the oldest member of the family the interviews gradually cover everyone, the youngest being interviewed last.
- The house is thoroughly investigated prior to interviews, and preferably a blueprint of it kept at hand.
- Interviews are properly conducted and the same individuals are interviewed again, if necessary. Efforts are made to detect inconsistencies and discrepancies as well as internal conflict in the information given. The interviewer is skilled in noticing a person's facial expressions and wavering mind and drawing conclusions from them. A novice accompanies a skilled and experienced activist with a view to eventually handling such cases independently.
- With the help of interviews, investigations and discussions with all members, it is generally possible to detect who is the agent of bhanamati. The conclusion drawn is most often correct. The concerned individual is warned to discontinue the mischief. A warning happens to be sufficient more often than not. However, at times, it becomes necessary to refer the case to a psychiatrist.
- Once in a while, the agent of bhanamati is detected, but she refuses to accept that she is the culprit. This can lead

to the continuation of bhanamati occurrences and increases the mystic fear and superstition in the minds of people in the surroundings. The investigator is blamed for not being able to detect the cause. In such a situation it becomes necessary to keep the bhanamati agent away from that place to eliminate incidents. But the members of the family seldom agree to do so, for it is very difficult for them to come to terms with the fact that a member from their own family is indulging in such acts. Here, the undertaking in writing (from the members of the afflicted family), regarding the right of ANiS to go to the press and/ or police, and that the family will carry out all the instructions given by the activists, is of great help.

- It is also necessary to educate the members of the bhanamati-afflicted family how to behave with the agent of bhanamati. When the agent is detected, the members of the family who had suffered at her hands are likely to be angry with her. They may ridicule and harass her. But such vengeful treatment is in no one's interest, because the agent is already a mentally disturbed person, and an attitude of ridicule and vengeance towards her is likely to exacerbate her mental illness. On the other hand, an attempt to sincerely understand her behaviour, and resolve her problems will go a long way. It is, therefore, necessary to instruct the family members accordingly and make available to the agent much-needed psychiatric help.
- The bhanamati agent who assures ANiS activists that she will put an end to her activities, sometimes goes back on her words. The family should be made aware of this possibility as well.
- All efforts should be made to avoid publicity of bhanamati incidents and of the agent perpetrating them, for the consequences can be disastrous for the people involved. The phenomenon makes sensational news, but one should not exploit its cheap news value, and instead try to understand the agony of the person who is driven to such extremes.

8

Buvabaji: Playing God

Wherever one looks, one finds babas and buvas—self-proclaimed spiritual men (and also women)—with supernatural powers spreading their net to trap their prey from all walks of life and all strata of society, rich and poor, young and old, men and women. This ever-spreading godman cult bewilders the rational mind.

Medical logic dictates that illness must be treated in an identical manner, no matter who is afflicted by it. But, financial logic ensures that the actual treatment received differs according to what the family can afford. This same principle of affordability applies to the doings of buvas. An ignorant woman from a rural area takes her sick child to the village quack, while a middle-class woman living in a town or city consults a medical practitioner with some qualification in medicine. For the same illness, an upper-middle-class woman approaches a child specialist, and a child from a very rich family will obtain the services of a team of specialists. Similarly, buvabaji too operates at many levels—from a bhagat or a devarishi who is consulted by the poor and ignorant toiling masses in villages to an astrologer or a palmist or a buva who has a parrot that emerges from its cage to tell the customer's future. Talismans, amulets and charms are, of course, always available to mitigate difficulties. The educated middle-class man with a good job or business worships Narayan Nagbali, undertakes the Vaibhava Lakshmi ritual and also approaches Mallinatha Maharaja or Narendra Maharaj or Aniruddha Bapu (popular godmen in Maharashtra). The buvas at the highest level work for the highest rung of the socio-economic ladder. Leading politicians, affluent bureaucrats, wealthy industrialists, art and sport celebrities require equally high-class buvas (and matajis). They call upon either Nirmala Mata or

Chandraswami, or Bhagawan Rajneesh, or Sathya Sai Baba, and attribute all their achievements so far and their assured future success to the favour and blessings of these great buvas. This all-pervading maze of buvabaji is utterly baffling.

In our struggle against buvabaji, every now and then we are advised, 'There are imposters, frauds, plunderers and exploiters in every walk of life; their exploits too are a kind of buvabaji. Better go after them instead of going after these religious men and women.' Of course, ANiS is against all sorts of fraud and exploitation; but that is not the focus of our activities. Our work (among other things) is against buvabaji and frauds of this sort.

A little in-depth deliberation is needed here: the number of buvas who actually treat diseases in some way or the other, or perform miracles is not significant. But there exist a great number of buvas who do not do anything by way of treatment or miracles and yet have a huge number of followers. These followers see their respective buva as their sole protector and saviour. These buvas do not actually treat people or perform miracles, but act in the name of paramartha (attainment and enjoyment of divine nature—beatification), devotion to god, knowledge of the Brahma, etc. Their power does not lie in their ability to deceive people. They skilfully link with themselves the longing for divinity that is traditionally rooted in the minds of people. Therein lies their power. This can be called fraudulence in salvation. In other words, it would not be wrong to say this: a person who supports deceptive notions like fate and many other unjust and outdated traditions that go completely against reason; explains the causes of all ills arising out of the present inequitable social system on the basis of these deceitful notions; recommends an unscientific way of handling problems and exploits people is a buva and the craft with which he achieves this is buvabaji. Defects in other walks of life can be rectified through lawsuits, bans, movements and the like. But this phenomenon of salvation and divine knowledge, in spite of its obvious deceit and trickery, lies in a domain where the law fails to reach. People are largely uninformed, incapable of understanding and apathetic to learning the truth of this phenomenon. Any mass movement, therefore, against this is impossible.

Every profession these days has many branches and sub-

branches. The ever-prospering business of buvabaji is no exception. There is no intention here to insist on a particular classification, but the nature of their operations suggests the following types:

- **Mantrik (one who uses mantras, that is, chants), devarishi (who treats visitations from deities), bhagat (one who deals with demons)** : All these are people whose dark deeds often become news and are reported in newspapers. But a large number of them are out of the reach of the media, police or ANiS. They indulge in black magic, charlatanry and offer dangerous advice and commit dangerous acts. Not only do they cheat and misguide people, they also commit grave, culpable criminal acts.
- **Treatment costing lives** : Many babas and buvas treat patients. Their treatment appears simple and innocuous. The needy poor find consolation in it, but in reality, the patient's life is at risk. Ramajan Gundu Sheikh, from Sangli district in Maharashtra, used to administer a powder to victims of dog bites to prevent hydrophobia. The injections given by doctors for the same purpose were very painful and, at times, produced severe reactions, aggravating the situation. Less painful injections are available now, but they are too expensive for common people to afford. Sheikh would give a few doses of a powder to victims of dog bite and console them, sparing them the pain of injections. This carried many of the victims to their graves. There is no cure for rabies, so far, anywhere in the world. The only treatment is the preventive anti-rabies vaccine that has to be administered immediately. Once the disease develops, even these injections are of no help. After receiving medicine from Sheikh Baba, the victims and their relatives felt relieved. But many of them had to pay for this blunder with their lives. The treatments of Aslam Baba, who operated on patients without any instruments, and the Farashiwale Baba, who diagnosed and treated all ailments by keeping a tile on the heads of the patients, fall under this category of life-threatening treatment.
- **Miracle-mongering babas** : Sathya Sai Baba is the best example of this category. He waved an empty hand in the

air and conjured up sacred ash or silver and gold rings. In Maharashtra, Anuradhabai Deshmukh is possessed by a deity at the time of the Somnath Pooja. A non-stop stream of holy ash then comes out of her fingers, and at times, even rudraksha beads. The miracle-mongers claim that this is a manifestation of the divine power bestowed upon them by god. Science tells us that such miracles just cannot happen. The claims of these buvas performing miracles is one more type of buvabaji that exploits the emotions of the gullible faithful.

- **Buvabaji that couples spirituality with science** : The best example of this category is Nirmala Mata Devi. According to traditional Yogashastra, the tailbone of every individual contains energy that is coiled up like a serpent in sleep, called kundalini. An individual can awaken his kundalini and obtain brahmagyan, the ultimate knowledge that can be attained only through arduous and long penance. But Nirmala Mata claims that she has invented Sahaja Yoga—a scientific way of awakening the kundalini in a very short period of time. The awakened kundalini rises up through the chakras in the back and escapes through the brahma randhra (hole) in the palate. This brings innumerable benefits to the individual. This buvabaji is carried out by coupling traditional spiritual concepts with autohypnosis.
- **Charlatans who use the language of science:** In the modern world, buvabaji sometimes needs to use modern language. Some years ago, very costly mattresses worth a lakh of rupees sold like hot cakes in Maharashtra. The manufacturers claimed that the mattresses were made of pieces of magnet and the feathers of birds with some special medicinal characteristics. Users of these mattresses are cured of many grave diseases, they claimed. This was an obvious case of buvabaji that used scientific terminology.
- **Buvabaji using parapsychology** : Uri Geller had become famous in Europe as an example of parapsychological power. He could bend spoons, break keys and stop a watch just by staring at those things. He could perform these miracles, it was declared, because of the parapsychological

power he had attained. But the magician James Randy burst the bubble by exposing the trickery behind this buvabaji. One Bhanudas Gaikwad from Baramati, along with a Parapsychology Research Centre in Maharashtra, claimed that he was endowed with the parapsychological power of sweetening anything he touched. This so-called miracle when exposed proved to be an underhand use of saccharine which is 500 times as sweet as sugar.

- **Buvabaji assisted by philosophical and spiritual language, magnetic personality and hypnotism:** Acharya (preceptor) Rajneesh who later became Bhagwan Rajneesh (later, Osho) is a good example of this type of buvabaji. His deep study of philosophy, impressive eloquence both in English and Hindi, magnetic personality and use of hypnosis helped in firmly establishing his reputation. He was convicted and asked to leave America or else be sentenced to 125 years of imprisonment. Many countries refused to allow him asylum on their soil. This exposes his so-called spirituality and philosophy.
- **Babas who are mentally ill individuals** : Certain individuals happen to be mentally ill, or are mentally challenged due to certain reasons. They may not have an opinion of their own, sometimes not even self-awareness. They may not abide by any rules of cleanliness and decent attire, conventions of speech or eating habits. But traditional Indian society glorifies such a person as videhi (weaned from earthly pursuits) or avaliya (absorbed in contemplation). Some people develop great respect for such people. This admiration and reverence is utilised by a few shrewd people to convert such mentally ill persons into a baba. The gang then can use this baba to establish a roaring business. It is no longer possible to point out the illness of such people, as it amounts to insulting the faith of his devotees.
- **Debauched babas** : 'Women flock wherever there is a buva'. Why women become victims of the buvas' lust is a topic of continuous discourse and controversies. But the allegation that the buvas take undue advantage of women's vulnerability and pent-up emotions has been proved over and over again. The Vaghmare Baba, near Pune (in

Maharashtra), an expert seducer, is a glaring example of this.

- **Babas claiming to be incarnations** : Hindus believe in the phenomenon of incarnation. Some babas exploit this belief in incarnation to become popular. They declare themselves to be the incarnation of this or that god. At present one such baba, who calls himself Kalki Bhagwan—an incarnation of Lord Vishnu—is doing roaring business in the south of the country.

What aids buvabaji?

The multitudes that throng round these buvas intimidates those who wish to oppose them. Those who support buvabaji belong to all age groups, social status and sectors, and so it is necessary to explain the complex causes that induce such devotion.

1) Helplessness, lack of stability, guilt: In the last two decades, the world has seen a sharp rise in unemployment. This renders an individual directionless. He is exploited but has no clue about who is the perpetrator of the exploitation. Trapped in such a situation, he needs support and is drawn towards a baba who is visible and approachable, and also quite communicative, quite unlike the unavailable god to whom he prays. The support of such a baba helps a person feel confident and equipped to deal with cut-throat competition. At the other end of the economic scale, new movies of popular cinema stars flop one after another; good cricketers suddenly lose their form. These celebrities on the decline attribute their failures to some unknown evil powers. They believe that the baba, swami or maharaj, who understands the machinations of the evil powers will help them overcome their misfortune. People from a third section of society find themselves in a different predicament. They amass wealth by immoral means and buy gratification and pleasure with it. But this also creates a feeling of guilt in their minds. On bowing down at the baba's feet, the intensity of their guilt is reduced. Mangesh Padgaokar, a well-known Marathi poet has described this psyche succinctly in his poem which translates as:

Humans low and dejected, their innermost core in pieces
Stressed under nameless intimidation and with no buttress.
An overbearing buva each one needs
Who will pick the lice of all unease.
The officer accepts bribes but not without first yelling 'Jai Sai'.
Unblemished and free, he wanders, blessed by his Sai!
Ours is not to search, ours is not to fight
Ours is not to meet life head-on
The backbone is worn and torn,
Meek and humble before the bully
Harp on buva's name to get drunk gleefully.

The real way to overcome helplessness and instability is to reason; to find out its cause; to fight against those that cause it. The buvas and babas wipe out all these possibilities.

2) The fear of an unseen destiny: Modern life is full of anxiety and apprehensions. The husband travelling in local trains that are chock-full daily may be caught in an accident; the young daughter who lives all by herself in an unfamiliar place might be molested; the neighbour's houses are raided, there is fear that ours will be the next; a son's friend drinks regularly, there is fear that the son too will become an alcoholic. All these possibilities plague one's mind. The baba who can 'predict' the future can also understand it and, at times, even change it. Even if none of this is possible, he assures us that we need not be afraid since we can always depend on his support.
3) Fulfilling unfulfilled desires: The present-day world has provided man with umpteen possibilities of enjoyment and gratification. These possibilities are enticing, but forever beyond the reach of an average man. His conscience does not allow him to adopt corrupt practices to get what he craves for. Then he approaches some baba who with his divine powers can give him the key to this Alibaba's cave of enticements.
4) Mental illness: About 1 per cent of Indians are prey to grave mental illness. Mild mental illness is found in 7 to 10 per cent. But most Indians are not aware that the mind can fall sick; and

those who are aware find it difficult to admit it. Sickness of the mind is equated is considered a blemish on an individual's character. In addition, the facilities available for treating mental illness are abysmally inadequate and far too expensive. In such circumstances, patients suffering from mild or severe mental illness call on some spiritual baba, buva, maharaj, swami, or mantrik who deals with demoniac possession. The patients find him more effective because of their own traditional notions and thinking.

5) Psychosomatic illness: Mental illness sometimes manifests as physical symptoms, like loss of speech, partial paralysis and blindness. In these cases what is really sick is not any part of the body, but the mind of the individual. This is known as psychosomatic illness. The imbalance or the illness of the mind can be restored or treated by a psychiatrist. Sometimes, the suggestions given by a baba whom the patient holds in the highest regard and deep trust also seem to work effectively in ridding the mind of its afflictions. When the mind is cured, all the physical symptoms caused because of it also disappear. Neither the patients nor the devotees of the baba know the psychological reasons for the illness. This provides a fertile soil for buvabaji to flourish.
6) Exorbitant price and lack of health facilities: A majority of the people of India, unfortunately, cannot afford the cost of treatment or cannot avail of medical facilities. The only alternative available to them are the Chadarvale Baba, or the Farashiwale Baba or Aslam Baba, who offer to cure the patient by covering him with a bed sheet, by keeping a tile on his head, or operating on him with their bare fingers.
7) Frustrated women: In our society, women experience frustration due to various reasons. There is no official mechanism that can console their broken minds and offer them the support to gather the pieces of their lives. To restore the balance of their troubled minds with support from the family is a tough job. Most often, she cannot seek an outsider's help either. All that she can do is to get assistance and consolation from sermons, satsangs (prayer meetings) or the company and service of a baba, because this recourse is sanctioned by society.
8) Atma, paramatma, brahma, parabrahma, moksha, mukti: A

web of all these words is ingrained in the psyche of all Hindus. All of us hear in our childhood about the individual's soul, that is atma, and the all-pervading universal soul, the paramatma, and the unintelligible discussion on the relationship between them. Words like maya (illusory world) and brahma, parabrahma and atma are planted in the child's brain along with the belief that the aim of life is to attain moksha, or emancipation. The words, without being understood in the slightest, make a deep impression on the child's mind as denoting something dignified, divine, lofty and salutary. The babas, buvas and others make abundant use of these words, assume great authority, and thus, build a firm foundation for their business.

9) The power that controls the universe and the theory of incarnation: Traditionally, people believe that there is some supernatural or divine power that controls the universe. That this power incarnates itself in a human form is something many Hindus believe in: god has incarnated himself in the person of the 'baba' that we worship and he will surely change our destiny and remove all the obstacles in our way. This psyche drives people to surrender to a baba.

10) Theory of Probability: Those who visit a baba are eager to know what is in store for them in the future. They also pray to the baba to use his divine power to make their future favourable, and enthusiastically describe how their baba makes correct predictions. The next step is to believe that, since the baba is able to predict outcomes correctly, the theory of providence or destiny must be true; and also that the baba who can divine the future must be great. In reality, the questions that lend themselves to correct predictions are of the yes/no type. Will the pregnant woman have a son or a daughter? Which of the two candidates will win/lose the election? These are not multiple choice questions. So any answer will have a 50 per cent chance of being true. When a child is born, it has to be either a boy or a girl. (The craze for sonography has deprived babas of their business of predictions in this case.) Similarly, out of two rival candidates only one can win and only one can lose. The one who wins will extol his baba's prediction; the one who loses only blames his own fate.

11) Need to express oneself culturally: Every individual needs to express himself culturally in a group. The joint family system still exists in India, particularly in the rural areas. Individuals in such a family have to respect the status of other members and behave according to their place in the hierarchy. In cities, on the other hand, many people live by themselves, free of any family pressure. They do not know who lives in the adjoining apartment. Neighbours are not party to each others' happiness and grief. However, every human being needs to be a member of some group to feel comfortable and secure. This emotional need is fulfilled in the large congregation of devotees of the baba, buva or maharaj. All those gathered, irrespective of social standing and gender, are at the same level as baba's devotees—members of one group. Each one experiences the consciousness and strength of the whole group.
12) Non-critical social psyche: An individual is surrounded by an evolving social reality. Since he is a rational, thinking animal, he is expected to keenly observe happenings around him, decide what is real and what is good and then take his own decisions. But the social psyche is just the opposite of this. Not only is it non-critical but it also becomes faith-based under the influence of the buva and baba. This non-critical, non-discerning attitude provides a fertile soil for buvabaji.
13) Gaining social prestige: Becoming a devotee of a maharaj or baba brings social prestige for both—the politician-devotee and the maharaj. The baba has a huge following, and when the baba takes notice of the politician, his prestige rises in the eyes of the baba's followers. On the other hand, the politician sings the praises of the baba. Thus this game of the 'siddha–sadhak'—the guru and his follower (that is, a gang of hypocrites)—is mutually very beneficial.
14) Intimidation by money, power, media and gangsters: Buvabaji is a prosperous business that needs no capital investment. But every business needs some legal or illegal protection mechanism; the ones that protect buvabaji are cruel and brutal. The babas, buvas and swamis may utter lofty words, but in practice they don't tolerate any speech or print item opposing them. Exposing them is very difficult. A huge uproar heaping insults in foul language is drummed up against those speakers or publishers who dare criticise the buvas. They

even resort to issuing threats, beating up the critics and dragging them to a court of law for defamation and demanding huge amounts of money as damages. Demonstrations are organised in front of the homes of critics. All buvas maintain a gang of professional ruffians to carry out all these acts. They buy well-wishers and offer hush money to critics. Since advertising time or space is easily and legitimately bought in an increasingly profit-oriented media, buvas advertise themselves extensively. Even the political power in the area of the buva's influence, be it the head of the government or political leaders, is purchased and kept gratified. Thus, these self-advertised spiritualists, in reality, deal promptly with their critics and in hard cash with those in power.

15) Dread of evil powers: There is a deeply-rooted misconception that an evil power exists and it can be used to harass others. People also believe that the mantriks and tantriks are able to manipulate this power and therefore, do not want to annoy them. The babas and quite often, their disciples, furtively threaten gullible people. Intimidated and scared of the evil powers, these people, do not talk about it openly, leave alone confronting the culprits.

16) The business racket: As the mantrik or baba gains popularity, people flock towards him for divine treatment. A chain of businesses emerge from it. The transport business prospers, carrying devotees to and fro; small shops mushroom to cater to the various needs and demands—tea, snacks, meals, accommodation, coconuts, flowers—of the devotees. Since the baba's prosperity is their prosperity, they form a protective shield for the baba and his buvabaji.

17) Recognition from the government and the public: Without any investment whatsoever, the babas and buvas earn a great deal, but they also take care to spend a tiny part of their income for public welfare. They spend on education or water supply or cater to other public needs. This earns them great popularity. The government, which finds that these activities ease some of the pressure on it, also acknowledges the baba's contributions. These acknowledgements further boost the baba's image.

18) Rumour psychology: Once the baba/buva becomes famous

for his divine powers, stories of the miracles take on a life of their own. Exaggerated and embellished tales of patients who benefited from gus divine powers, and first-hand experiences of bankrupt men, who were once wealthy, are told and retold with great enthusiasm. When investigated, all these stories have proven to be baseless rumours.

19) Apathy and a lack of vitality: Indians tend to lack the fighting spirit. Seeking novelty and excitement, and searching for new horizons is something our culture lacks. We are taught to endure our preordained destinies without complaint. This school of thought nicely complements buvabaji too.

20) Unsatisfied sex life of women: A big perk of becoming a buva is the easy possibility of close contact with women. But the ease with which so many women surrender is astonishing. Why are women so easily attracted by these men? One possibility is that they are deceived by the baba's divine aura, and meekly deal with the consequences of it. Another possibility is that the woman's own repressed sexual desire draws her close to the baba. A woman cannot express her feelings about an unhappy sex life for various reasons; even discussion of it is seen as a sin. In a sexual act, the man feels satisfied quickly and retracts from the act, while the woman's desire remains unfulfilled. But the burden of social and cultural restrictions forbid her from discussing her frustration, while the man has many avenues of not only expressing, but also fulfilling his sexual desires. Women then control their sexual dissatisfaction by concentrating on bringing up their children, chanting a deity's name, worship or some other so-called spiritual pursuit. Howsoever strong her desire might be, she cannot fulfil it outside her marriage. It is also dangerous for her to have any such relationships. Even today, a woman cannot develop a close friendship with a man without being branded as loose and unchaste. But since the baba has religious sanction, a woman can remain in close contact with him without any blemish. Neither society nor her family will suspect her of any immorality because of their firm traditional faith. Sexual relationships easily develop between these women and the babas who fulfil their desires.

In addition, they also get priority when other devotees are patiently waiting for a glimpse of the baba. Women of all ages

and from all strata of society readily flocked to Vaghmare Baba who was just an ordinary-looking person. A mother-in-law and her daughter-in-law, a mother and her daughter all enjoyed the baba's amoral company. Many experts in the science of love believe that a large part of a woman's fulfilment of sexual desire is made of not only the sexual act, but also affection, sympathy and love that are communicated through contact. Let me also stress here that most women do not fall prey to the baba's licentious behaviour. They linger a little longer in a place of spiritual divinity in the hope that hearing a few words of wisdom will give them peace and solace. The sole object of visiting the baba is to be comforted by his benevolent glance and contact with his feet. An Indian woman does need such support. This need is traditionally fulfilled by the guru or maharaj. Nothing here suggests that it is sexual desire that drives all women to seek comfort from babas.

21) Use of professional techniques: Modern buvabaji uses modern and sophisticated techniques. Lectures in the Queen's English on subjects like yoga, sex life, spiritual emancipation, or personality development win the approval of highbrow society. The challenge really is to establish certain practices as ways of sadhana (disciplined practice or learning). They acquire the form of dance, music and games, and create an illusion that all these are essential for living one's life. Babas today adopt modern corporate methods of communication, advertising and pursuing their objectives. At times, a visit to one of these babas could some relief to an individual, but that has nothing to do with a solution to the problem; the relief results from many causes, such as:

- Purgation, which is a method of exhausting the mind and the body.
- Secretion of endorphin, a biochemical substance, in the brain that induces the feeling of well-being.
- Psycho-somatic illnesses are cured by giving suggestions to the mind, for which the baba gets the credit.
- The belief that the baba's blessings are a sure way to recovery brings relief to the patient, i.e. the placebo effect.
- Some diseases are cured automatically with time. If a

patient receives the baba's blessings during this period, the baba gets credit.
- Talking with the baba or seeking his advice is a kind of counselling which proves effective at times and the credit then goes to the baba's divine powers.
- Sometimes, a patient's immunity improves all of a sudden and the disease subsides. The reason for this sudden increase in immunity, or spontaneous regression, has not yet been discovered by science. But the so-called miracle is attributed to the baba's blessings.
- A person's critical faculty becomes dim in a group. His ability to discern right from wrong, proper from improper and true from false and his capacity to reason all disappear. The huge crowd that gathers in a baba's congregation extols his virtues and powers. The individual is caught up in the crowd frenzy, and feels that his problems will be solved.

Karmavipak Siddhanta

Two theories—the theory of prarabdha (the doctrine of destiny or fate) and the theory of miracles are used extensively to further the hold of spiritualists. The reason for the bounteous crop of buvabaji in our country is that the mental make-up of people is dominated by notions of destiny—vidhilikhit, daiva, naseeb and so on. All of these words more or less mean that the future of every individual is predetermined.

The concept of prarabdha while similar to ideas of fate is also slightly different. The doctrine known as the karmavipak siddhanta states the following: 'An individual has to suffer or enjoy the fruit of his bad and good deeds respectively.' These deeds are classified as kriyamana karma, sanchit and prarabdha. Kriyamana karma means that, whatever we do in the present, the fruits of those doings are accumulated and added to what is known as 'sanchit karma', that is, the fruits of the deeds of previous births. A person is reborn in the present because he is obliged to suffer (or enjoy) the fruit of some of his accumulated deeds—his sanchit karma. These deeds of the past (to suffer which we are born in the present) forms our prarabdha karma. All Indian philosophies, except the Charvaka Darshan (the

philosophy of the Charvakas), have accepted this theory of karmavipak; it has become a distinctive characteristic of Indian philosophy where karma siddhanta is recognised as a universal law.

This law firmly governs the Indian mind. Even today, anything good that comes our way is because of our good luck, and anything bad is, of course, because of bad luck. 'No one gets anything earlier or in greater measure than what he is destined to get.' This adage is deeply imprinted in our minds. All difficulties and sorrows that one has to suffer are looked upon as the inevitable blow of destiny. Karma siddhanta reminds us, 'Your good deeds will certainly bear sweet fruit in the near future and evil-doers will have to suffer some day for their evil deeds.' If only this were true! But if wishing it to be true leads one to the conclusion that it is true, that conclusion is then simply wishful thinking.

Justice is not a natural phenomenon. Human social systems have long been in the making; and the idea of justice is only three to four thousand years old. Before that there was no distinction between justice and injustice. Even today, one feels that there is very little justice in the ways of the world. All arguments made in favour of karma siddhanta are, therefore, weak and inappropriate. This theory is not only useless, but also quite unjust. The karmavipak theory has no provision to detail what consists of good deeds and bad deeds, which is totally against the principle of justice. If the culprit does not know for which deed he is being punished, he will keep repeating those crimes; similarly, if it is not known which deed is rewarded, a person will be at a loss to know which deeds he should repeat. Again, since the rules of morality are relative to place and time, it becomes difficult to decide which is good and which bad. The same deed can be judged differently as good, bad, forbidden or uncalled-for by different codes of ethics.

In addition, we are told that the karmavipak theory has been in practice since time immemorial. But it took a few lakh years for the ape to evolve into the human during, during which period these evolving creatures did not possess the ability of ethical reasoning. The ability to reason has developed extremely slowly over thousands of years. Even today, humans retain the ancestral animal in them to a large extent. Karma siddhanta does not gel

with all these facts. But because of it, Indians lose their initiative, innovative tendency and the urge to destroy the bad. Apathy and indolence, which are conducive to buvabaji replace all of these positive attitudes.

Primitive humans were undoubtedly quite vulnerable and, therefore, accepted the idea that they could not escape whatever was going to happen. While this is understandable, it is not possible to prove that any phenomenon is predestined, as that would entail knowing what is going to happen in the future. Now the dilemma here is that belief in the future is a precondition for its prediction. In space, some regions are near and some far away. On reaching regions that are near, the far away regions come into sight. When the same principle is applied to the dimension of time, it becomes clear that, while the future exists, it unfolds gradually. But for time, only the present exists, and that too, momentarily. It quickly becomes the past and the future takes its place as the present. This means that there is no such thing as the future in actual existence. The future is merely a possibility. If this argument is accepted, it is impossible for any person to be able to actually see the future.

Captivated by the completely imaginary concept or niyati, or destiny, people become weak and more fearful. They attribute their misfortunes to their prarabdha from which there is no escape since it is the result of one's own earlier sanchit. Thus, instead of searching for the root cause of one's exploitation in the prevailing social and physical conditions, it is traced to each one's praktan, yet another name for destiny. As this tendency to blame prarabdha for social exploitation continues, there remains the need for a saviour who can discern and even change one's prarabdha. Thus, the karmavipak theory strengthens buvabaji. In order to fight against buvabaji and end the mental slavery of people, it is necessary to expose the illogical nature of karma siddhanta.

Miracles

The idea of miracles is a powerful weapon in the hands of buvas. Most people in this country believe in miracles. Even if they are taught the scientific view that the universe is regulated by a cause-and-effect relationship, there exists a belief in a divine

power that is capable of disregarding fundamental scientific principles. The babas, buvas, swamis and maharajs all claim to be able to perform miracles of some form or the other. These days, babas have become careful, and avoid making these claims themselves. But their devotees claim to have experienced these miracles time and again. The maharaj then pretends to detach himself from miracles and says, 'What my disciples experience is their concern.' But some babas, like the Sathya Sai Baba, still boastfully maintain that the miracles they perform are the manifestation of their divine power. What they want to establish is that the miracles are like visiting cards given to them by god so that mere mortals can identify the baba as a prophet whom god has sent for the deliverance of ordinary people.

An incident or an act that appears impossible, improbable or illogical is called a miracle. Being beyond the comprehension of human intelligence and understanding, it is considered to be supernatural. Such incidents fascinate spectators, and those who perform miracles are revered and worshipped. Such people are considered divine, possessing knowledge of the past, present and the future. Miracle-mongers misuse this belief. Science tells us that nothing can happen without a cause, and when the cause of a phenomenon is discovered, it does not remain a miracle anymore. In fact, miracles are nothing but different kinds of ingenious and skilful feats performed by shrewd individuals to deceive the ignorant. Not only do most people not understand this, but they become angry at such revelations. They take it to be an affront to their faith in the baba. This enables the baba to exploit his devotees physically, financially and sexually. Convincing people that miracles do not exist can stop both buvabaji and exploitation by the baba. When the miracle-monger is challenged, his devotees expect him to accept the challenge and give the hecklers a fitting reply. But what happens in reality is just the opposite. It is the baba who finds an excuse and flees from the challenge, thereby exploding the myth of his divine power.

Challenging miracles has always been a very thrilling experience. But it is not for the thrill that ANiS challenges them. ANiS opposes miracles because believing in them is inconsistent with the scientific outlook which every Indian citizen is obliged to inculcate in themselves in accordance with our Constitution.

ANiS once challenged a baba who claimed that he could cure incurable diseases with his divine power. The process of challenge was determined and agreed on paper. The test to verify the baba's healing powers consisted of sending ten patients across whom the baba was then supposed to cure. When it was publicised in the newspapers, phone calls began coming in from all over, with people imploring ANiS activists to include their relatives in the test. ANiS tried to convince them that the baba would not be able to cure anyone and they should not waste their time, money and energy, and causing considerable inconvenience to the patient in travelling to and from the place of the test. But the relatives would not give up and kept entreating, 'We have tried everything to no avail. This is our last chance. If we are lucky, the patient will be cured. If not, we will write it off as our ill luck.'

This mentality clearly shows that faith in miracles is wish-fulfilment. Miracles will continue to be performed as long as penury, poverty, greed and craving continue to exist. Five thousand years ago, when science had not developed, miracles seemingly happened. Now science has developed by leaps and bounds, and we understand far more of the world than we used to. Yet, miracles continue to take place because humans have not given up their craving for it. So instead of believing that miracles do not happen, he prefers to believe that while a certain claim made by a particular baba might be wrong, there must be some other baba that can perform real miracles. This explanation though superficially appearing to be in order is actually not. Agreed that a person cannot disengage from his desires; yet he can fulfil his desires on the strength of his own abilities, prowess (this may even regrettably include corruption or bullying) and courage; but certainly not by becoming a puppet in the hands of the unknown (destiny) or by believing that knowing the unknown is possible with the help of a divine power and by surrendering to that power. This he definitely can and should avoid, especially in this age of science when it is possible to inculcate a scientific outlook through education.

The scientific outlook is a core element in today's educational policy. Unfortunately, students have not been told how this value can help us confront miracle-mongering courageously and powerfully. One can accept, for a moment that

man will continue to be carried away by his desires; it is his weakness. But babas or buvas exploit people's helplessness and dissatisfaction and create a fraudulent business out of it?

Another argument made in connection with miracle-mongering babas is, 'Even if 99 per cent of them are frauds, branding all 100 per cent of them as frauds is also unscientific.' The simple explanation for this is: the logic that proves that 99 per cent of babas and buvas are frauds should be applied to test the remaining 1 per cent too. If by chance, this test reveals any ambiguity then all that we can say is that enough evidence is not yet available to refute the miracle as of today. In such a situation, wisdom lies in continuing the effort to collect the necessary evidence (to expose the miracle) and act on the basis of what has so far been. To be confident of the fact that this miracle too will be uncovered and stride ahead is the mark of the modern man.

Spiritual buvabaji

There are many babas and buvas who do not indulge in miracle-mongering or any other practices of buvabaji as referred to above. And yet crowds flock around them. This needs to be explained. The guru tradition is of immense importance in Indian society. This tradition of finding a contemporary guru and surrendering to him completely is a thought propagated by Kabir and other Muslim saints and inherited from them by Hindu society. They maintained that sincere devotion to the guru results in the guru's favour and helps to unite the individual's soul with god. Saint Dnyaneshwar extols gurukripa (guru's blessings) and gurubhakti (devotion to guru) in his treatises, *Dnyaneshwari, Amritanubhav* and other short works. Verses compiled on devotion to the guru and the belief that some baba/ buva is one's guru can be traced to Dnyaneshwar's eulogising guru worship. Dnyaneshwar extols the guru in a beautiful metaphor at the end of the sixth chapter of *Dnyaneshwari* . At the beginning of the tenth chapter, he praises the guru as an incarnation of Ganesh. In the twelfth chapter, he praises the guru's 'kind eye', while in the fifteenth chapter, he worships the gurucharan (the feet of the guru) in his mind, and in the beginning of the sixteenth chapter, he considers the sadguru (a

true guru) to be chitsurya (light of the mind). The seventeenth as well as the nineteenth chapters too are replete with admiration for the guru. Dnyaneshwar believes that one does not have to go in search of a guru. What is required is to gain command of oneself; when one keeps carrying out one's duties, dedicating everything to god, one comes across a guru without effort.

In present-day society, guru worship manifests itself in the worship of some baba. This means that the devotees of that baba consider themselves imperfect lesser beings and their guru as an omnipotent being. The baba now seems to be endowed with all good qualities and virtues, and his company drives away humiliation and dejection from the minds of the devotee. This further fills the devotee with enthusiasm and vigour, increasing his faith in the guru. The devotee gains assurance of release from worldly worries and concerns from the guru through prayers, sermons, spreading the guru's thoughts, repeated readings and worshipping the guru. He believes that the guru has helped him understand his own problems and discover the right path. The guru-dominated culture imprinted on our psyche helps the process further. One staunch devotee leads many more people to his guru and absorbs them into the congregation. This trend is aptly described in the following lines:

Hail the Guru
Nature of Brahma embodied in a body of virtue
Power of the great God to sanctify has manifested in you
Essence of all sacred rivers
Concentrates in the water that washes your feet
A serene stream of self-realisation
Your spells of silence speak

A devotee sees his guru as Brahma the creator. The idea of Brahma itself is so hazy that the idea of it acquiring a body full of virtues becomes all the more baffling. To consider the water that washes his feet equivalent in piety to the waters of all our sacred rivers is the height of intellectual bankruptcy. The idea that even if the great guru does not speak a word, his silence too pours out not a trickle but a non-stop stream of atmagyan (realisation of the true self that is Brahma) is to willingly give up

independent thought—the characteristic that most defines a human being.

This is what Asaram Bapu, a guru of the present day, had to say regarding the concept of guru in an interview: 'Everyone should find a good guru just as we go to a good school, good teacher or a good doctor. Lord Shankar told Parvati the greatness of guru in the *Skandapurana* . The guru uproots all doubts from the minds of his disciples, frees them from all fears and relieves them from the cycle of birth-death-rebirth. Such a guru is called a "sadguru". Just a glimpse of the guru liberates disciples from the bondage of desires and passions and gives them unending joy. The individual is released from the cycle of birth and death; only because of the merit accumulated in the earlier birth can an individual get such a guru.' He said that the guru removes the sorrows of his devotees in three ways:

1. The spiritual way of dhyana (meditation), pranayam (regulating respiration), mantra (chants).
2. The intellectual way (satsang).
3. Vibrations—this includes many things from curing people of their diseases by means of oscillations to reaching tides of joy to crores of people.

Such guru worship is impossible without completely mortgaging the intellect and becoming deeply superstitious.

In order to comprehend the intellectual aspect of the movement against buvabaji, it is essential to understand the psyche of the devotees for whom the baba/buva is their saviour.

When asked why they go to such babas, the reply is, 'We do not want to gain anything from this devotion; it is devotion for the sake of devotion.' And on being asked where this devotion springs from, their prompt reply is, 'Devotion is the fruition of our life.' Naturally, when asked what fruition they mean, the reply is, 'Devotion begets the spiritual bliss of life.' One may well ask, 'What is spiritual bliss and what evidence do you have of this spiritual bliss?' But instead of an answer, it is likely that there will be a question in return along the lines of: 'Why do you want any evidence? Our baba is a great authority. Do you ask your parents or teachers to give evidence for everything? Very few people understand Einstein's theory of relativity. Even you

have not understood it. Then do you ask for evidence for it? In the minds of devotees, there is utmost spiritual bliss in their baba's kind glance. It is a matter of experience. Where then is the need to ask for evidence to prove it? To ask for such evidence hurts our faith.'

The principle of scientific outlook that is enshrined in our Constitution, is: ask for evidence; examine it carefully and believe to the extent the evidence stands examination. We do observe this in our daily life; or at least are expected to observe it as a rational citizen of the country. One may have faith in one's mother, but it is not necessary to close all the windows and doors of one's home during an eclipse in accordance with her suggestion. The son can marry a girl of another caste defying his father who is dead against it. The person who is a boy's teacher in his childhood can become his colleague later or perhaps his assistant. It all depends on the progress each one makes in acquiring knowledge. Anyone who is ready to study hard enough can understand Einstein's theory. Einstein noticed and corrected the shortcomings in the theory propounded by the great scientist Newton. In the same manner, any scientist who detects drawbacks in Einstein's theory will be welcomed in the world of science. Insisting on evidence and asking questions is the tendency that has led humans to progress and enhancement.

The trust of the devotees is not based on actual personal experience but faith. This is very much like the trust children have in their parents. But when the child grows into an adult, his relationship with his parents changes; it now is a relationship between two adults. The sentiments of love, respect and gratitude remain as before. But there is no more of the blind faith that the child once had. An adult who depends on his parents all his life will not be accepted as a fully developed mature individual. However, the nature of the devotee's faith is more complex. To believe the baba's words that observing certain rituals will surely bring material benefits, or that the baba's divine power will double one's currency notes is utterly irrational. But in following the instructions of the baba lies the fruition of a devotee's life because the baba can unveil the ultimate vision of human beatitude to his devotees. This argument should be studied in greater depth. The arguments of the parties involved are:

1. Some truths are beyond human comprehension.
2. Yet knowledge of these is essential for ultimate human welfare.
3. With God's grace, some authorities are able to reveal it for the sake of human good.
4. My baba, swami or guru is such an authority.
5. Human beings are incapable of proving or disproving the statements revealing this knowledge.
6. So one should have faith in such a man of authority, and accept the knowledge he reveals as valid and be happy.

A thorough scrutiny reveals the internal discrepancies in this argument. To believe that some truth is beyond human comprehension and that the baba can understand it is jumping to a conclusion. How can one accept that a certain kind of knowledge is essential for divine rapture without verifying its validity? To believe that a certain individual is an authority of an unverified knowledge is to throw experience, logic and evidence to the wind.

Devotees argue that while it is not possible for them to provide the evidence that doubters ask for, the impressions of god's grace can be clearly discerned in their baba. So they have thrown themselves into the baba's service with full faith in him. They argue that this is why steadfastness is of utmost importance in matters of faith.

These great men, devotees argue, are clearly distinguishable from the common people. People are fascinated by such people and search for both these types of characteristic. This psychology gives rise to buvabaji and sustains it. There are typically two types of characteristics that people look for in the babas and buvas:

1. The first type is a person who forecasts the future which turns out to be true. Since the laws of science do not apply to him, he can perform miracles. Whatever he utters becomes the truth.
2. The second type is a man of extremely righteous behaviour; he is virtuous and pious. He lives his life on a different plane. Buddha, Christ, Tukaram and Gadge Baba, a twentieth-century saint from Maharashtra are examples of this type.

That any truth should be accepted in proportion to the evidence available is the essence of rationalism. Faith has no place here. It has been proved that people can live an excellent, creative and selfless life without any faith. There is a school of belief that faith is an inborn characteristic of the human mind and part of man's evolution from animal. However, if the nature of this faith is perverse, selfish and unreasonable, we have to fight against it. Being civilised and cultured means being aware of the possibilities of a constructive relationship between the self and other human beings and between nature and other life. These possibilities bring us face-to-face with diverse lifestyles that may differ from our views but must be respected. In this sense, we may accept that one distinct characteristic of the human mind is manifested in the form of faith. However, this should still be consistent with a moral life based on equality. This X-ray test will help us decide whether or not faith in a baba is following a devious path.

A pure and pious life is a noble goal; but to surrender to a baba in order to be able to lead such life can in no way prove beneficial. What is necessary is that the individual himself should be aware of his sexual and other desires. An individual cultivates self-respect and enjoys life by enjoying freedom and the ability to take rational decisions. The view that there are chances of going astray when there is freedom to take decisions, and that the spiritual vision of a baba is necessary to bring one back on track, is not at all conducive to the development of an individual as a complete human being. It is important to note that the human mind ought to be free even for the self-realisation that the spiritual way endeavours to walk.

Also, there is no clear agreement on the meaning of spiritual benefit, not even among the babas and their disciples. Yet all of them, with great certainty, reiterate the adage, 'Metaphysics or spiritual knowledge begins where science ends' and proclaim that spiritual success is life's ultimate goal. The outline of metaphysical thought presented by each religion, sect or guru differs from, and at times even contradicts, other metaphysical views. However, consideration of all these rational arguments is not enough to convince an individual about the fallacy of his notions. Yet even within the premise of the traditional and commonly acknowledged meaning of spirituality, it is possible to

argue against these notions. (This argument is expounded further in the chapter 'My Understanding of Spirituality' in volume two of *The Case for Reason* .)

The traditional and acknowledged meaning of spirituality is along these lines: 'In each living being in the world there is a soul—atma. The world (or universe) is engulfed by a paramatma —the universal soul. In each individual's life there is brahma, while the parabrahma is in the universe. When the atma—the individual soul—meets the paramatma—the universal soul—or when the brahma and the parabrahma meet, the individual reaches the stage of ultimate beatitude of absolute bliss. The individual then attains "sachchidanand"—rejoicing in just being and understanding, that is, he regains his own true, eternal and ever-joyful nature, and perceives it.'

This woolly account ends with the question, 'What more can one expect from life?' What a jumble of words! So how can one distinguish a spiritual man from an ordinary mortal being? The simple indication is that such a spiritual man is ascetic and righteous. For him, fulfilment in life goes beyond creature comforts. The truly spiritual person does not indulge in empty words but acts in the interest of humanity. Just as physical exercise builds up the body, spirituality is an exercise for inner mental development. So, the life of a spiritual person is pure, simple, pious and full of compassion which can be experienced by people around him. Spirituality is actually all the above qualities put in practice. All the rest are empty words. Repeating the sacred name of a god or guru that keeps one aware of one's moral responsibility in behaviour is worthy behaviour; otherwise it is just din and clamour.

We have in our country plenty of examples of both true and mock spirituality. Nirmala Mata awakens the kundalini and practises spirituality; but she owns marble palaces in several countries. Narendra Maharaj, in his sermons, advises people to live and let live, but without batting an eyelid, falsely accuses ANiS of being paid agents of Christian missionaries and converting people to Christianity. He also openly threatens to sever the hands and feet of ANiS members N.D. Patil and Narendra Dabholkar. When there is an uproar about such language or intentions, he quickly turns round and disowns what he said in his sermon. His disciples, under his instructions,

damage public property at airports because he was asked, as per the rules and regulations of air travel, not to take his staff with him. The name of Sathya Sai Baba contained 'Sathya', or truth, but he did not allow anyone to truthfully examine the divine power with which he performed his miracles. When his own disciples attacked him, he had to hide in the bathroom, and when all the assailants were securely locked in a room, he reportedly came out and shot them all. Nobody dared utter a word about it. Though accused of sexual molestation of boys and young men by foreign devotees, for a long time nothing was done about it. They amass enormous wealth which goes into various trusts controlled by members of their own families or by trusted devotees who manage all the affairs of the babas in complete secrecy. They own modern luxurious cars, huge estates, at times even private aerodromes. When assessed on the real criteria of spirituality such as restraint, morality, non-acquisitiveness and purity of character, their masks drop.

In contrast to such babas, we have the great Gadge Baba [3] in Maharashtra. He collected crores of rupees and spent each rupee in improving the life of common people. He was an illiterate man, but kept an account of every rupee that came into his coffers. All he owned was a staff, the tattered clothes on his body and a piece of a broken earthen pot that he carried on his head. When he came to know that his wife and daughter were accommodated in a room of an asylum built from donations given to him, this flawless saint actually went there and threw both of them out. He swept village after village with a broom during the day, and at night awakened the villagers through sermons that attacked superstitious belief. He taught that humaneness was the only true religion. Another such saint was Vinoba Bhave. [4] He walked over the whole country for a full twelve years, entreating people to donate land, and collected forty-two lakh acres of land to distribute to the landless poor. During the whole period of his travels, he wore only a dhoti and a towel on his shoulders. While travelling through various provinces, he learned the local language. He knew well at least twelve Indian languages. All his life he remained a bachelor and did not own any property. These shining examples distinguish the lustrous, true spirituality of certain people from the cheap, phony spirituality of other babas and buvas.

ANiS opposes miracle-mongering because it plays a crucial role in creating a false culture. Swami Vivekananda has clarified this very well when he was asked by American news media to perform miracles. In reply to their demand he roared, 'I am not a miracle-monger. Some incidents do baffle our senses but they too occur according to natural laws. But the mind under a spell is convinced that they are real. Wise men never indulge in such fooling around.'

That mind which falls prey to buvabaji and miracles engenders a kind of mental slavery. A society of such people cannot face any problem with confidence or complete any task with courage and perseverance. So to bring society back on the track of self-respect and belief in one's own effort as well as fearlessness, there is no way out but to oppose the miracle-mongering of the buvas and babas.

According to religious traditions, miracles can be performed by yogis with the siddhis (superhuman powers) they acquire through their yogic strength. But religious traditions also mention that people should not be fooled by these siddhis, and therefore, should not endeavour to acquire them; these siddhis should, in fact, be shunned because they are malevolent. Our saints have in the past entreated us repeatedly not to get trapped in the web of siddhis and miracles, because it is a sure-shot way to deterioration and ruin. Truly religious men have always opposed miracle-mongering. Those who perform miracles and gather disciples are chastised in the literature of the saints. Sathya Sai Baba was famous for producing golden chains from thin air quite frequently and with ease. Let us suppose for a moment that he did possess supernatural powers. Then the question arises, 'What had this baba done to reduce the bankruptcy of our nation?' We experience droughts and severe rainfalls in many parts of our country, both destroying life and property. But no baba, so far, has even attempted to bring rain during droughts, or stop the torrents when they inundate vast regions. The reason why they are not able to do this is simple. There is no such thing as supernatural power to begin with; and the babas/buvas do not possess any power at all. To pursue such babas/buvas with devotion is not religious behaviour.

Why do people who believe in miracles turn to religion? Not because they wish to give up selfishness or want to become pious

and noble. What each one of them wants is some personal benefit; that is, a job, promotion, relief from the guilt of acquiring black money, and such like things. Most of them are conscious of their own sinful deeds and their conscience makes them uneasy on this account. To get relief from one's own guilty conscience without forfeiting the benefits accrued from these sinful acts, the easiest way is to surrender to a baba or buva. And for this purpose, there is nothing as helpful as a baba who demonstrates his charisma by performing miracles or indulging in noble spiritual exhortations. It's not true that religious people are prone to buvabaji. On the contrary those who are irreligious, in the moral sense, are likely to become devotees in the hope that they will be protected by the baba's blessings.

According to our Constitution, it is the responsibility of every Indian citizen to propagate the scientific outlook, cultivate an investigative intellect and promote social reform and humanism. A scientific outlook means the confidence that the universe is bound by the law of causality. An investigative intellect is one that understands reality with an open and keen mind. To promote social reform is to examine traditions in the light of the present situation, and choosing from it those things that are beneficial to individuals and society. Humanism stands for universal brotherhood. This duty of every citizen stipulated in the Indian Constitution and the psyche created by buvabaji are mutually contradictory. The mind that surrenders to buvabaji fails to fulfil its constitutional duty.

When people attack miracles, the so-called miracles performed by saints of old are offered as evidence that such a thing exists. These miracles, of course, are supposed to have occurred hundreds of years ago and there is no evidence that they did. See what saint Tukadoji Maharaja, a saint of the modern times, says about the perils brought by miracles:

Many ran after miracles and perished
Please, gentlemen, do not extol them any more
Knowing emotions of people, hypocrites visit the village
To chase the gullible and exploit them
Giving up all endeavours, they expect benefit without efforts

This escapism induced by the belief in miracles and babas is particularly evident when it comes to proving the authenticity of their miracles. Since the damage caused by miracles in the life of individuals and society is obvious, the buva should be made responsible to prove the validity of the miracles they claim to perform. If they agree to do so, the scientific outlook enshrined in the Constitution will be spread among people and they will be convinced that no miracles can happen outside the law of causality. This will be a big jolt to miracle-mongers and those who build their personal empire of buvabaji with the help of miracles. However, the victims of buvabaji are themselves opposed to any such move. Instead of the miracle-mongers, they lay all the blame on ANiS. Making a law to prohibit miracles, therefore, remains a distant dream.

A person's most powerful weapon is his intellect. The development of his culture has gone hand in hand with the development of his mental power. The slogan of the scientific outlook is: 'Examine with intellect and accept only what is validated.' One just cannot believe in miracles unless one abandons this point of reference. One example will explain how the victims of buvabaji think.

One Vilasbaba from Taradgaon in Satara district, Maharashtra used to ignite the yagna kund (sacrificial pit where a fire is lit) with water and create holy ash from coins. We, ANiS activists, held a public meeting to oppose him in his own town. A big crowd gathered. We began demonstrating miracles and to duplicate the baba's tricks, ignited fire with water and created holy ash from coins. Some fifty-odd devotees of Vilasbaba rushed on to the stage and told us, 'What you people are performing are just tricks which schoolgoing children with a little knowledge of chemical reactions can also perform. What our baba does is altogether different. He performs real miracles because of the divine powers he possesses.' Such an argument puts an end to any further debate.

A magician performs miracles that are a hundred times more effective and astonishing than what Sathya Sai Baba or any other baba can. But nobody surrenders to or prostrates in front of the magician. Nobody asks him for solutions to life problems. A

magician is a great entertainer and the miracles he performs are the manifestations of his art. His performance is worth the price of the ticket. The magician who is able to pull a rabbit out of his hat works to earn his bread. But the baba drawing a little bit of holy ash from his fingers is venerated. And the devotees believe that the ash can fulfil all their desires. A devotee might go to court with the holy ash given by the baba, and blow it into the air quietly while he is standing in the witness box. He feels assured that when the particles of his vibhuti reach the witness of his opponent, he will be rendered ineffective and give evidence in favour of the devotee. Similarly, when the particles reach the pleader of the plaintiff, his argument will become useless. Just a particle of the ash sanctified by the baba's touch, on reaching the judge, will ensure a judgement most favourable to our devotee. Is there any meaning in such ridiculous sentiments? But the devotee is greatly annoyed if anyone raises doubts about its effectiveness because of the mental slavery produced by buvabaji. The devotee commits himself to the care of the baba, buva, swami, maharaj and his divine powers. He mortgages the most precious gift that nature has bestowed on man, that is, his talent, decision-making and reasoning abilities, to the power of buvabaji. The person becomes a helpless dependent. This mental slavery is also dangerous because it impedes the process of reform. No baba or buva ever utters a word in favour of reforms. He issues an edict that devotees should surrender to him, and claims that therein lies the emancipation of the devotee. The baba's word constitutes the charter of his empire. His word is 'brahmavakya'—a statement of the ultimate truth and morality. Those who dare antagonise the baba, are silenced using fair and foul means. Those who surrender are assured of the greatest good. All sects of buvabaji build a structure that is conducive to fascism.

A constant fight against buvabaji has to be waged. But this fight is not new to Maharashtra. In 1935, *Kirloskar* , a very influential magazine in Maharashtra, had organised a union which they named Buvashahi Vs Buvashahi Sangh (a union of buvas to fight buvabaji). The application for membership of this union read, 'Our society is full of buvabaj ("addiction" to buvas) women and men. These buvabaj quickly craft buvabaji. Buvabaji kills man's talent and makes him lazy. He then becomes a

staunch devotee of a buva and with the blessings of the buva expects to get everything without any effort. Buvabaji hampers the progress of our society and our nation. Since I believe it is necessary to annihilate buvabaji, I wish to become a member of this union.' We can see that the struggle of ANiS is, therefore, not new. People have been struggling against buvabaji since at least 1935.

All humans share with animals the innate drives of food, sleep, fear and sex. What a human possesses in addition to this and what other animals lack is the intellect that enables man to discern what is good and what is bad. We call this ability 'reason'. The man who is trapped in buvabaji kills his own intellect; and along with it diminishes the difference between him and the animals. In *Mudrarakshasa* (an ancient play in Sanskrit), the character Arya Chanakya says, 'I don't mind if my own people and my relatives leave me; let all those who flocked round me for my wealth leave, let the army desert me, let me lose all my money, I don't mind. I care only for my intellect; my intellect should never desert me. That is all I need.' The intellectual slavery that Arya Chanakya loathes was rampant in religious and social spheres in ancient India, and prevails even today. The general feeling in India is, 'All that is traditionally inherited is the best and no criticism regarding things in connection with those traditions is called for. So the question of reform does not arise. Any change that may be necessary should be left for an "Ishwar Avatar" (an incarnation of Lord Vishnu).' This society is habitually prone to discarding independent reason and surrendering to a 'distinguished' person, instead of persevering to become rich and powerful on the basis of one's own efforts and abilities. These distinguished persons—the buva/baba/swami/maharaj—are aplenty, wherever you go. How to free our society from these factories is a problem of the greatest social importance. Most of these babas and buvas keep harping on the message that this world is maya (illusory), transient. It is a teaching that causes people to lose their desire for knowledge. They choose to turn away from 'this' world and retire from life, in a manner of speaking. A society immersed in buvabaji becomes lazy and indifferent to the family, society, nation and reform.

To protect oneself and society from buvabaji we should

resolve: ‘I will not lose self-confidence. A scientific outlook and reason will enable us to understand what our problems are, how to solve them and to what extent they can be overcome. We remain steady and firm in our behaviour when we stick to acknowledged moral conventions. A person’s worth, within his own limits, lies in living his life with courage and honesty that is based on his humanity. The purpose of life rests in staying away from buvabaji and helping others to stay away from the mental slavery of it. The guru or baba who guarantees that he will solve all the problems of his devotees for all their lives actually pushes them deep down into the quagmire of enslavement and faith. A genuine guru, on the contrary, enables his devotee to stand on his own feet and gives him courage and strength to fight his own battle of life. This guru makes his disciple see clearly and act courageously, makes him sharp-sighted, fully aware and strong enough to fend for himself. Each one of us does have one such guru of our own, in the shape of our rationality, which is really our lone saviour.’

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3 Gadge Maharaj (23 February 1876–20 December 1956; also known as Sant Gadge Maharaj or Sant Gadge Baba) was a mendicant-saint and social reformer from Maharashtra. He lived in voluntary poverty and wandered to different villages promoting social justice and initiating reforms, especially related to sanitation. He remains a source of inspiration for various political parties and non-government organisations.

4 Vinayak Narahari ‘Vinoba’ Bhave (11 September 1895–15 November 1982) was an Indian advocate of non-violence and human rights.

9

Does ANiS Oppose Only the Hindu Religion?

This question is asked with the deliberate intention of discouraging ANiS activists and spawning prejudice in the minds of people. Across India, rationalist movements are confronted with the same question with respect to their role in eradicating superstitious belief. ANiS's activities do involve critical appraisal of religious practices directly or indirectly. But those who scrupulously follow age-old religious practices firmly believe that what they practise is the true religion. Such people feel threatened by ANiS's activities aimed at developing people's critical faculties. When such thinking is enabled, people start criticising religious practices and religion itself. To avoid this, orthodox Hindu religionists want to keep people from ANiS. That is why they deliberately drum up allegations that we oppose only the Hindu religion. What is the truth of the matter? It is as follows:

- Superstition is really black marketing in the business of faith. So what religion these black marketers (superstition-mongers) follow should be nobody's concern, least of all that of ANiS. ANiS has always opposed exploitative buvabaji and religious rituals that boost superstition wherever and whenever they occur. ANiS has various methods of its own for dealing with this exploitative trade. It has fought against many Muslim babas and buvas, and the details of these campaigns over the last twenty years can be found in the relevant magazines published by ANiS. The organisation has also fought against Christian priests who claim that due to their prayers blind people can see again, the dumb start to speak and the lame walk. The

organisation has also opposed the expensive but meaningless rituals of the Jains; and the ritual of dashing heads against the wall of a village temple, in the Phaltan taluka, practised by those who call themselves Buddhists. Again, all those who accuse ANiS of being anti-Hindu can peruse and verify the details of all these battles in ANiS's magazines.

- It is true that a majority of the struggles against superstitions involve Hindus. But that can't be helped since Hindus constitute nearly 80 per cent of the population of India. Consequently, 80 per cent of the struggles that the organisation has fought are against Hindu superstitions; a large majority indeed!
- People are provoked if their superstitions are criticised by outsiders. Even criticism of the superstitions of one caste by another caste causes hatred and ill feeling. Criticism of the thread ceremony of the brahmins, of the banning of widow remarriage prevalent amongst the Marathas, or the animal sacrifice by the Dhangar community during fairs, by any caste other than the one that observes the superstitious custom leads to not only discontent, but also creates unrest. Since 80 per cent of the population of India is Hindu, many ANiS activists are also likely be Hindus. Naturally, when Hindu activists talk about Muslim superstitions, the Muslims are bound to be upset.
- The caste structure is almost exclusively a Hindu socio-religious system. There are roughly 6,000–6,500 castes among the Hindus. In fact, caste seems to be more important than religion. Each caste has its own rituals and rites, its own customs and practices and its own traditions and mores. They may have been useful and necessary sometime in the past. But right now most of these rituals, customs and traditions are useless and nothing more than superstitions. The Hindu religion, being much older than other religions, does not have one religious book, but a plethora of gods and goddesses and books. In comparison, Christianity is just 2,000 years old and has a single book. The Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost trinity signify more or less the same identity. Islam is even younger, just 1,400 years old and has only one Allah, one Prophet, and

the Muslims revere only one book. The plethora of gods and goddesses, umpteen books of religion and innumerable customs and traditions of the Hindus make it a fertile ground for generating superstitions.

- An important fact to be considered here is that, in the course of the evolution of Hindu religion, there have been many eminent social reformers who dared to criticise superstitions mercilessly. The Charvaka and the Lokayat tradition that existed 3,500 years ago is a conspicuous example of this fact. One can compile a long list of recent Hindu social reformers, among them Mahatma Phule, Shahu Maharaj, Lokahitawadi Agarkar, Dr Ambedkar, V.D. Savarkar, Prabodhankar Thakre and Gadge Baba. (This is a list drawn exclusively from Maharashtra.) These great men, in fact, cautioned all humanity, not just one religion, to be humane and vigilant, but their teaching inadvertently largely addressed only the Hindus. Here, mention of the ruthless examination of religious books undertaken by Savarkar, the hero of the independence movement, and more importantly from our viewpoint, eulogised by his followers as the 'ruler of Hindu hearts', is a must. His pitiless scrutiny of religious books illustrates the long tradition of Hindu social reformers who endeavoured to eradicate superstitions. Progressive Hindu reformative sects, like the Prarthana Samaj, maintained that there is only one god and one needs no ritual or sanction to pray to him.

  Here is what Savarkar has said about religious books of all religions: 'The man who does not want to become just a telephone of religion and wants to possess a mind and intellect of his own, should overcome his belief in the "word" and nurture the opinion that despite there being respectable "Books" and matter for thorough study, the Vedas, the Avesta, the Bible and the Koran are but man-made tomes and should be studied accordingly . . . Four centuries ago, Europe was similarly enslaved by the unalterable supremacy of religion; but since the time Europe distanced itself from the Bible and adhered to science, it was freed from the shackles of 'shruti–smriti–puranokta' (codes of behaviour, morality, worship

stipulated in religious tomes of supernatural origin) and became modern and up-to-date; Europe is now four thousand years ahead of us. It has conquered three continents! If the Indian nation aims to be like Europe, it should close the 'book' of the ancient era, forget the supremacy of shruti, smriti and the Puranas, keep them safely away in libraries and enter the age of science. Those old tomes are relevant only for telling us what happened in the past. But the science that is objective and experimental alone qualifies as the basis for deciding what is appropriate for today. Modernity contains the essence of all that was useful in past experiences; but the shruti–smriti–puranokt cannot have even a speck of modern knowledge. Therefore, we ought to be modern and up-to-date. Whether a thing is good or bad, and whether reform is beneficial or not should be answered, hereafter, only on the basis of one test, that is, whether it is useful or useless today. One should never ask the question whether something is sanctioned by the scriptures.'

- There are religious powers in Maharashtra and in India, who indulge in selfish politics. They consider themselves to be the contractors of what is good for the Hindus. They claim the privilege to decide which reforms in the Hindu religion are necessary and which aren't. ANiS is a progressive organisation, and its activists do not identify themselves with the religion and the caste they come from. They do not talk about religion, and are in a sense indifferent to it. Some Hindu organisations, self-styled protectors of Hindu religion, take advantage of the indifference that progressive organisations show towards religion, and issue edicts about which religious issues should be talked about and which are prohibited. They intimidate people into following their edicts. It is a way of declaring their monopoly as the protectors of religion. ANiS need not and does not recognise this monopoly, because it feels that such parochial self-proclaimed protectors and authoritarians have never been the spokesmen of the Hindu religion, which is liberal, tolerant and ethical. They are not and will never be the spokesmen of all Hindus. Secondly, most of the activists of ANiS are

born to Hindu parents, and are Hindus in the sense that they have not converted to any other religion. So they do have the right to talk about the superstitions in the Hindu religion. There is no reason why they should surrender this right to the Hinduists.

- Let us for a moment assume that ANiS works for eradication of superstitions only amongst the Hindus. But the important issues here are—whether the work undertaken by ANiS is good; whether it is desirable and whether it is beneficial to society. ANiS is confident that its work is appropriate, desirable and essential. Even some religious Hindus agree that this work ought to be done. And yet they ask why we seek to eradicate only Hindu superstitions? The confusion in their minds is clear when they ask this question.

Superstition is like the trash and litter in a home. Let us assume for a moment that our nation is a ten-room house. So, the religion with 80 per cent population will have eight rooms. Islam with 12 to 13 per cent of the population will get one room. The remaining one room will go to the non-Hindu, non-Muslim population. Now, if ANiS, at its own cost, undertakes the cleaning of eight out of these ten rooms of the house, the major part of the house will, obviously, be free of garbage. Isn't it illogical to take the stand that unless the 'ninth' room is cleaned first, we will not allow anyone to touch the other eight rooms? Eradication of superstitions is undoubtedly in the interest of the Hindus, and to oppose it is injurious to people. Those who oppose ANiS harbour the ridiculous notion that ridding Hinduism of superstitions will weaken Hindu pride, while superstitious Muslims will remain hardened fanatics. Hardened and fanatical Muslims will then easily defeat the emaciated Hindus whenever skirmishes take place, they believe. One can only pity those who proffer such flimsy and deceptive arguments.

PART TWO

ANiS AND ITS CAMPAIGNS

10

The Case of Sahibjadi

When Sahibjadi, an uneducated and mute Muslim woman, who materialised in the colony in front of my house, began to perform miracles, we at ANiS became a little disillusioned about our vigilance. No one knew where she came from. But there she was, living in the home of the naib tehsildar. In just a week, her miracles made her the centre of attraction. Victims of karani (black magic) and their relatives began visiting her. She would ask them to bring some soil, a vessel with some water in it and a few lemons. She would then proceed to cut a couple of lemons and put them in the water. Then she would add the soil. Being mute, she would make some gestures. After that, she would cut some more lemons and put them into the vessel. She would then tell the person concerned to put his hand in the vessel and squeeze the lemons. And to the great surprise of all, the visitor would find nails and pins while squeezing the lemons! This signified that the visitor or his relative who was the victim of the karani was now free. Sahibjadi would get her due reward, albeit without asking for it.

A local cable channel telecast a few episodes of Sahibjadi, thereby lending authenticity to her 'divine miracles'. We decided to challenge her. A draft document of the process of challenge and its acceptance was prepared and signed by both sides. The challenge was to start at 10 a.m. on a pre-decided date. On the decided day, the naib tehsildar could not wait for the process to begin. He began ringing me from 9.30 in the morning to hurry up and reach his house. I reached his residence along with my colleagues. The police too had arrived. The naib tehsildar had been explicitly warned that, since he was hosting these activities, he would be accused of being an accomplice if the miracle failed.

But he had such faith in Sahibjadi's expertise that he ignored all warnings. To start with, one woman sat in front of Sahibjadi. She began cutting some lemons and putting it in the water, followed by adding soil into the same vessel. Finally, when the woman squeezed the lemons in the vessel containing water, she found, as expected, nails, pins and a talisman which she took out. Only Sahibjadi, the police and the ANiS activists, who were watching her intently, were present. Yet, no one could detect where the nails, pin and talisman had come from.

Then the process of challenge began. A twenty-three-year-old girl from Pune, who had been experiencing pinpricks in her head for the last four to five weeks, sat in front of Sahibjadi and the process started as usual. But before Sahibjadi could proceed further, I demanded that Sahibjadi ought to be examined. Two female activists examined Sahibjadi in a room. She then came out, and was about to start her process of removing the karani, when I stepped in and replaced the twelve lemons that were placed in front of her with the lemons that we had brought with us. Sahibjadi began her magic; she rubbed the lemons very hard on the head of the girl. When all the lemons were finished she asked for a dozen more lemons, calculating that now she would now receive her own lemons. But we had brought another dozen lemons, which were now handed over to her. She rubbed all of them on the girl's head and asked for more. We hastily arranged for more lemons. Sahibjadi used thirty-eight lemons in all till the juice of the lemons began to trickle down from the girl's head and enter her eyes, due to which the girl began weeping. Now, Sahibjadi called for the Koran, pretended to read something and then declared that the programme had to be postponed to the next day. It is important to point out here that the constant feeling of pinpricks in the head could be a mental illness, and Sahibjadi's use of supernatural treatment to cure it is a culpable crime. So we demanded that she should be arrested and the goods and articles she used confiscated. We asked to examine her bag which contained lemons. The lemons which we had confiscated from her before she began her procedures and the lemons in her bag were cut in the presence of the police and journalists. Four of those lemons contained pins and nails neatly embedded in them. We also found talismans and small packages in the lemons. Sahibjadi would hide these lemons tucked in her

sari round her waist and stealthily take one out and mix it with the lemons brought by the karani victim. She was so adept at it that when she took out the lemon, neither the women activists—who were sitting very close to her and intently observing her—nor the male activists and the police noticed.

Finally, she had to confess her crime. On being arrested, she demonstrated how she hid the lemons in her sari and how deftly she would take one out and mix it with the other lemons. It was astounding! It was not possible to capture, even through videography, her skilful act of quickly tucking her hand into the pallu of her sari, picking up the lemon in her fist and mixing it with the other lemons. These actions were hidden by the sari. But when she was taken into a room for examination by the women activists, she had to throw away her hidden lemons. However, she had taken care to keep some of her own lemons in the heap of lemons in front of her. But we replaced all those lemons at the eleventh hour and thus put her in a tight spot. She still hoped to get her own lemons after the lemons we brought were used up and to remove the karani by taking out pins and nails from the lemons. When she realised that she was not going to get her own lemons, she attempted to postpone the programme. Also, because our lady activists were sitting so close to her, any sleight of hand became impossible. Some of us did not even feel it necessary to examine her before the procedure started. But because of our collective conviction that all miracle-mongers are scoundrels, we decided to examine her. Had we not done this, she would have proved her miracle in front of the police, journalists and the video camera.

Sahibjadi was prosecuted and the crime of being an accomplice to an act of crime was registered against the naib tehsildar and the members of his family. Sahibjadi's karani had brought him to ruin.

11

‘Qamar Ali Darvesh ki Jai!’

On the Pune–Satara road, about thirty miles from Pune, near the turn that will take you to the village Khed Shivapur, is situated the shrine of Qamar Ali Baba. People of all religions visit the Qamar Ali Darvesh dargah. Off and on, it comes into the limelight because a feature by the government’s Films Division or a TV channel.

There are two stones in front of the shrine, one said to weigh ninety kilos, and the other, sixty kilos. It is said that, to lift the heavier stone, eleven men (and no women) need to use only one finger each, while the lighter one apparently needs only nine fingers. The team just has to touch the stone with their fingers and cry, ‘Qamar Ali Darvesh ki Jai!’ And the stone becomes as light as a feather. The number of people has to be eleven and nine, no more or no less. The cry has to be ‘Qamar Ali Darvesh ki Jai’ and nothing else.

There is an old myth behind this. Qamar Ali Darvesh was a fakir (Muslim mendicant) who had witnessed the manifestation of god. No one knows how and when he reached this place. But, having done so, he expelled all the goblins, spirits, fiends and devils from the village and at the age of seventy attained samadhi by burying himself alive. The fakir cursed two demons, who lived in this place, and turned them into stones. It is these stones that people lift and hurl down on the ground.

The story has long generated great interest and curiosity. Mumbai Doordarshan telecast a programme about this miracle in June 1987 without offering any scientific explanation. ANiS then had to step in to try and demystify it. We received plenty of letters. Some letters taunted us, saying, ‘Here is a real miracle; how can you explain it?’, while others sincerely wanted to know

whether a miracle like this was possible.

Seven of us, myself, Professor Arde, Sarvashri Mandape, Shinde, Pange, Dayal and Babar reached Khed Shivapur. We had to make our way to the shrine through rows of beggars, flower vendors and pilgrims, and up a short flight of stone steps that led to the gate of the shrine. The two big boulders are placed on either side of the main entrance. One boulder is sandstone, and the other, black granite. Both have been chiselled into the shape of a pressure cooker and have a diameter and height of about one foot each. At the entrance to the shrine, there is a board announcing that women are prohibited from entering the shrine.

A short youth with a red handkerchief tied round his head stood beside the stone. He explained to us as to how the stone had to be lifted.

We were seven of us. So with four others who appeared to be locals, we put the forefingers of our right hands to the stone. After a count to make sure that they were exactly eleven, we shouted in unison, 'Qamar Ali Darvesh' and attempted to lift the stone. The stone moved just half a foot up and then turned over on one side. We tried once again but the stone would not go up more than half a foot. The devotees were quite confused; then it suddenly dawned on them we had not removed our footwear! We were ordered to do so. Now, once again applying our forefingers, we cried, 'Qamar Ali!' The result was no better. The four who had joined us now became restless and withdrew. They were perplexed. How could the power of their sage fail them? In fact, there was no cause for confusion, since we had decided to just touch the stone with our fingers and not apply any force. But poor Qamar Ali could not help!

Then, we invited four visitors to join us, apply their forefingers and shout the slogan as required. To the surprise of all the devotees, we were able to lift the stone up to the shoulder. The pallid faces of the four men now brightened. More and more people gathered round us. Then we declared that we would lift the stone without shouting Qamar Ali. Someone from the crowd warned us, 'Do not try to be too wise. Even wrestlers from Kolhapur tried to do so just a couple of days ago and failed. It is not as easy as you think.'

Mandape then said, 'Let us see. It is worth trying.' We all put our fingers again under the stone and shouted, 'Mahatma Phule

ki Jai!' We lifted the stone much above the shoulder and hurled it down. The crowd now became restless. Next, we attempted another tactic; why only eleven people, why won't ten or twelve do? We tried it very successfully not only on the heavier stone, but also on the lighter stone using eight or ten persons instead of nine.

The atmosphere was now quite conducive to exposing superstitions like the one in question. Two women onlookers too desired to put their fingers to the stone and asked us if they could try their hand at it. Actually, women were not allowed to even touch the stone. Often, devotees blindly support such irrational rules of religious places. They are scared of disobeying such rules for fear of inviting unnecessary problems. But we invited the women to try lifting the stone, regardless.

Now, ten of us—two women, four other onlookers, and four of us—put our fingers under the stone and exclaimed, 'Come on, shout one, two, three!' The stone was lifted very easily and quite high. The women looked thrilled. It was, by now, quite clear that there was no mystery behind the lifting of the stone. Once the causality of the miracle is understood, the mystery disappears. We put on our shoes and were about to leave when it struck us that we had not tried lifting the stone with our shoes on. So we lifted both the stones with our shoes on and hurled them down.

Here is the explanation of the so-called miracle. The fingers under the stone apply force on it. The force works equally on all sides so that it does not tilt and is held firmly. Shouting in unison helps apply the force simultaneously. Haven't we all heard labourers singing in unison while moving large blocks of wood or raising water tanks to the top of a building? The stone gets lifted because force is applied from all sides. Moving up from the ground level requires the fingers to apply more force. But once it moves up from the ground all the load is borne by the muscles of the wrist and the elbow behind it. Thus lifting the stone up high becomes easy.

We do not know what actually happened to the 'demons' that were turned into stones by the fakir. But while hurling the stones which symbolised superstition, a thought did come into our minds, 'When will we be able to throw off the yoke of the demons of superstition from the necks of our people?'

12
The Miracle of Langar

Just about half a kilometre from Nagarale village in Sangli district stood a small memorial of the Muslim saint, Gaibibaba. In front of the tomb was the langar, a wheel-like stone, painted green with a hole in the middle. The langar had been brought from Patan taluka in Satara district.

The langar, it was claimed, could answer questions and give advice in matters concerning devotees, be it the disappearance of a family member, a case of bhanamati or karani or advice about buying a buffalo. The procedure was: the devotee would touch the langar and ask his question. If the answer was a 'yes', the langar would become very heavy, so much so that no one could lift it, while a negative answer would make it lighter, and the langar could then be easily lifted. For example, in the case of bhanamati, the first question of the devotee would be, 'Has bhanamati been done?' If the answer was yes, the next question would be, 'Has A done it?' If the answer was in the affirmative, the devotee would come to know who the culprit was, and proceed to act against him. If the answer was in the negative, the next question would be, 'Has B done it?' And thus it went on and on. Each question had to be paid for and, sometimes, the total amount paid would be a significant sum. Moreover, those who were accused of doing karani or bhanamati would have to bear the brunt of revenge by the victim's family.

The influence of the langar and the shrine of Gaibibaba began to spread rapidly in the nearby villages. Thursdays, new moon days and full moon days were the days when devotees' questions would be answered. Big crowds would come in on these days.

A few of us decided to investigate. Professor Arde; Netaji

Gurav, the leader of an OBC organisation; Pravin Lanjekar, a journalist from Karad and I reached Nagarale. Around ten enthusiastic members of Chhatrabharati, a student organisation, had also joined us. The train for Nagarale had already departed by the time we reached Kirloskarwadi. Baburao Jadhav had gone to Kundal to fetch the police personnel who were to accompany us. We had submitted an application two days in advance, but it had not got forwarded to the station chief by the hawaldar. The station chief arrived at noon, and we were able to convince him about the need for police personnel. Two hawaldars accompanied us. Leaving our rented bicycles in the village, we reached the tomb on foot, walking through the sugarcane fields. By that time, the crowds that had arrived in the early morning had left by the 8 a.m. and 10 a.m. trains. Yet, some twenty-five to thirty people had stayed behind. Some people from the village too had come out of curiosity.

The shrine was in the woods with four whitewashed brick walls on all sides. A couple of green flags were hoisted on the walls. There were two tombs inside. One was a little bigger, with a green velvet chadar (bedspread) covering it. In front of the tomb was the langar—a well-made wheel-like stone, six inches thick and more than a foot in diameter. It was painted green and had a hole in the centre. We all went inside and gathered around the langar. Other onlookers and devotees also came in. Jaitunbi Mullah too came in from the side room. She wore white clothes and sat near the raised platform around the tomb.

I switched on my tape recorder and said, ‘Madam, the fame of the langar has brought us here. Is it true that when a question is asked, the langar answers by becoming heavy or light according to whether the answer is positive or negative respectively?’

The lady said, ‘Yes, it is absolutely true.’

‘Madam, it’s difficult to accept. A stone cannot become heavy or light alternately. Its weight has to remain the same. This is deceiving people,’ we told her.

‘Any of you can sit on the langar and see for himself,’ replied she.

We took out a spring balance from our bag; weighed the langar in the presence of so many onlookers; it weighed fifteen kilos.

I again said, ‘Madam, one of us will sit at the langar and ask two questions, “Is Vasantdada Patil the governor of Rajasthan or not?” and “Is there a ten-rupee note in my pocket or not?” Answers to both these questions are positive. However, I can tell you right now that the langar will not become heavy and we will be able to lift it easily. So, let your man sit and try it.’

Jaitunbi seemed convinced and called for one of her men. That man, named Patil, squatted on the floor in front of the langar. He bent and folded his hands in reverence before the stone and meditated for a couple of minutes. Then the lady said, ‘Gaibibaba, these people have come to verify whether your miracle is genuine or fake. If it is genuine may you become heavy and if fake, may you be light as flowers.’ Now, this Patil was Jaitunbi’s man and he believed in the miracle of langar. It is likely he was under the strain of the unexpected change in the atmosphere, or perhaps his honesty had an upper hand on him at that time; whatever it was, he lifted the langar effortlessly. Jadhav who was ready with his spring balance, weighed the langar that was supposed to have become light as flowers now. But its weight remained same, fifteen kilos.

We rebuked Jaitunbi sharply, ‘Madam, what is this if not outright deceit?’ She did not reply. For five minutes there was a strained silence. She was sitting crestfallen. Then she raised her head, rested on the langar, and with a frenzied glance at the tomb wailed loudly like a possessed woman, ‘Gaibibaba, these people from Satara have come all the way just to prove you wrong. If you are genuine, make the langar heavy; if not make it light.’ Patil lifted the langar again without effort.

It wouldn’t have mattered even if Patil had not been able to lift the langar easily. But since he did, our task was simplified. I said to her, ‘See, Madam, your Gaibibaba himself has now told you that he is a fraud; but even if he had not admitted that, he surely is a fraud because the langar that you claim to be as light as flowers weighed the same fifteen kilos which you have witnessed with your own eyes. We have no quarrel with your pir or the people’s devotion towards him. But what you are doing is sheer hypocrisy and fraud. You have got to shut down this business of yours from today onwards; otherwise, we will have to deal with you differently.’ She nodded. We took out a sheet of paper and obtained her confession admitting the crime as well as

her pledge to stop the business.

While we were penning down the confession and the pledge, Jaitunbi got up and shoved the langar away in disgust and said, ‘Take this away; I don’t want it here.’ The two hawaldars who were silent all this time stepped forward as soon as the question of transference of property arose. Shifting the langar from that place involved hurting the faith of the public. The police asked her, ‘Madam, are you giving this away willingly? Are you sure, you have no complaints regarding this?’ She nodded again. Then her thumb impression was taken; signatures of the police and of the people present there, were also taken.

We carried the langar with us. But Professor Arde told us not to throw it away, for people might spread rumours about the whole episode. Eventually, though, we had to throw it away.

We returned to Nagarale and held a public meeting in the school premises. People from the village and boys and girls of classes eight, nine and ten gathered in huge numbers. We kept the langar on the table. Professor Arde and I addressed the crowds. The children responded with great enthusiasm. The speech that started with the langar episode went on to include the genuineness or otherwise of the phenomenon of being possessed by a deity. Students from Ramanandnagar, a nearby village, entreated that we visit their village too and halt there overnight as they had a lot to share with us.

13
Godbaba

This is a story from 1982, before ANiS came into existence. Bhanudas Gaikwad, a young man of about twenty-five, from Baramati, was sleeping under a fig tree when he suddenly woke up. He had felt something penetrating into him. And soon, to his great surprise, he was transformed into Godbaba, a godly man who turned everything sweet with his mere touch. When tea was made out of the water in which Bhanudas put his hand in, no sugar was necessary. The tea was sweet. Bhanudas soon became famous. He was asked to report at the local police station on suspicion of fraud. There, he shook hands with the inspector who found that his fingers had become sweet from the handshake. Later, he touched the bangles of a radio newsreader and the bangles became sweet too. Soon, the news was broadcast on radio. Then, a popular weekly published a cover story on Bhanudas entitled 'Lord Datta's blessings make his touch sweet', and a collection drive was launched to build a temple to Lord Datta with Bhanudas's help.

During this period, an institute for research in parapsychology investigated Bhanudas and his sweet touch, and concluded that this phenomenon was beyond the explanation of known scientific laws and, therefore, a miracle. Soon, some international institutions of parapsychology too became interested in Bhanudas's case. And he became Godbaba. In actual fact, none of these institutions had ever tried to investigate the matter scientifically. I, therefore, decided to undertake this task and reached Baramati. We invited Bhanudas to Advocate More's bungalow to try and fathom the reasons for his sweet touch.

We began our investigations by sealing the water sweetened by Bhanudas in a bag. Then we collected and sealed several more

samples of water which had been sweetened by him after he had washed his hands repeatedly. We then sent these samples of water to the Shri Ram Research Institute in Delhi.

In my opinion, it would have been quite easy to find out if any synthetic stuff had been deftly mixed in the water to make it sweet, but it would be difficult to find out what exactly had been used for this purpose. It would have required many tests. I, therefore, decided to take a calculated risk even before the results of the lab investigations came out. I suggested that we find out whether it was saccharine that had been somehow mixed in the water. Saccharine, a synthetic chemical, is 500 times sweeter than sugar and is available across the counter with all chemists, in the form of very small pills which can be held between two fingers and crushed into powder, thereby spreading it on the fingers. The amount of saccharine required to sweeten anything is very little. My guess proved to be correct. The sample taken before washing hands contained saccharine and the subsequent samples, taken after repeated washings, showed a gradual decrease in saccharine content. Saccharine, being a synthetic substance, cannot be created by any magical secretion from the body. Clearly, instead of investigating the phenomenon scientifically, those who were interested in publicity could not restrain themselves and rushed to an institute who too proclaimed it a miracle without investigation.

Later, this miracle of making everything sweet by touch became an important part of the ANiS programme of demonstrating miracles. Our activists made everything, including chillies, sweet to taste. Sometimes, a sharp member of the audience would get up and ask the activists to wash their hands before performing the miracle. The activist would wash his hands thoroughly with plenty of soap and water, wipe them with a towel and yet retain the sweet touch. This miracle was performed in several schools on some occasion or the other, and sometimes as soon as the word Godbaba was uttered, children would begin shouting ‘saccharine’!

Regardless of our findings, Godbaba continued to perform his miracle all over Maharashtra; for one thing, people are eager to see miracles and are deceived. Secondly, there is no law to prohibit these acts.

Once, he performed at the main post office in Mumbai.

Crowds surrounded him immediately. But, to the ill luck of the baba, there happened to be an ANiS activist on the staff of the post office. She went out, bought some saccharine pills, powdered them and applied it to her fingers. She then began performing the miracle with such zeal that the baba had to beat a hasty retreat. Still, Godbaba did not accept defeat and give up. After a while, he met Balasaheb Thackeray at his residence 'Matoshri' in Mumbai. Bhanudas sweetened Balasaheb's hand with a mere touch. The narration of this episode occupied a full page of the next day's *Dainik Saamna* . In it, Balasaheb in his unique style wrote, 'So far, so good. Till now we knew only one Baba from Baramati and he was bitter. You on the contrary are sweet.' The bitter baba remark was a snide reference to his rival politician Sharad Pawar, who too hailed from Baramati.

A few days later, the daily *Sakal* from Pune printed a prominent report about Godbaba, running into four columns of the front page. It contained many malicious statements against me, as well as an open challenge. I was surprised; *Sakal* did not normally print such sensational news, and that too on the front page. However, since the news was prominently featured on the front page, I had to reply to it suitably. I did reply and *Sakal* printed it, again on the front page. But amidst all this, Godbaba, who had been almost forgotten, came back into the limelight. Then, I challenged Godbaba to prove his miracle. He was not interested in proving himself, but he did want to remain in the limelight, and continued making controversial statements. Amidst all this, Godbaba and the Rotary Club of Pune played a trick; the Rotary Club declared they would conduct a so-called scientific investigation of Godbaba's miracle. I was not invited. There was no well thought-out plan about how the investigation would be conducted. The club invited magicians, chemists, dieticians and other people. It distributed the water that had been made sweet by Godbaba to all present, but did not send it for any laboratory analysis. The test appeared to be a premeditated, preplanned sham. The miracle of Bhanudas was declared to be real and a press release was sent to many newspapers. While none of the Pune dailies published it, it appeared on the front page of the daily *Lokmat* from Aurangabad. Other editions of *Lokmat* too gave much prominence to the sensational news. The report said, 'Godbaba completed the

process of challenge successfully. Dabholkar, despite being invited, did not attend. The test has validated Godbaba's divine power. He now demands that Dabholkar undertake a six-month long pilgrimage, on foot to Pandharpur and Alandi.' *Lokmat* was a popular newspaper reaching all nooks and corners of Marathwada. ANiS activists who read this report were somewhat perplexed by it. I immediately refuted the mischievous news, but *Lokmat* printed it three days later in an inside page. To top it all, a learned lady advocate, a member of the Rotary Club, slammed a defamation notice of Rs 1 lakh on me.

Replying to this notice, I said, 'Godbaba performs this miracle using saccharine and I firmly stick to this opinion. So let this case be brought to court, where I will have a chance to prove myself in front of the judge.' Naturally, nothing further was heard about the defamation case. But Godbaba continued his performances of miracles. By now he had realised that, to remain in the public eye, he had to be noticed by ANiS, and if we failed to take notice of him, he had to somehow compel us to do so. We decided to ignore him for a while.

Later, a Vivek Jagar (awakening rationality) debate was arranged between Dr Shreeram Lagoo and myself in the Mahatma Phule Hall at Pune (see Chapter 17 for more details about the initiative). The hall was packed and the debate was in full swing when Godbaba arrived and forced his way into the auditorium. He had brought a local cable newsman and an advocate with him. He started pushing his way towards the stage, complaining that I had denigrated and slandered him and so he had to challenge me. His real aim was to cause a disturbance in the gathering. ANiS workers found it difficult to control him. Fortunately, however, the police inspector of that part of the city was present in the audience in plain clothes. He noticed Godbaba's overbearing demeanour and asked him to leave. Later on, investigations revealed that the advocate accompanying him was a fake.

After this incident, I happened to visit Baramati twice to give lectures. On both occasions, Godbaba came uninvited to the gathering and occupied a seat in the front row. He had brought photocopies of the news items that had appeared in *Sakal* and *Lokmat* and distributed them to all the guests in the front rows. Nobody took notice of him or his pamphlets. He would also ring

me at odd times and hurl abuses and threats. Eventually, he realised that his mischief had completely failed to perturb me and gave up.

14

The Gurav Brothers and Their Eye Treatment

The Gurav brothers hailed from Kushire, a small town in Maharashtra in Panhala taluka of Kolhapur district. They once had a dream, they claimed, that Jyotiba (the presiding deity from a famous nearby temple) had revealed himself in human form to them. This miracle brought their town into the limelight. The story was as follows: the Gurav brothers' bullock had become blind. In their dream, they were told to put the juice of certain leaves in the bullock's eyes. It is also said that they were told about this medicine by someone from the forest who had then disappeared. They used that medicine and, to everyone's surprise, the bullock regained its vision. The Gurav brothers then reasoned that there couldn't be too much difference between the eyes of a bullock and those of a human being. Hence, the medicine that cured the bullock's blindness should cure that of human beings too. They decided to try it out. They began treating patients and the news spread like wildfire.

Soon, people from faraway districts in Maharashtra and even Karnataka began coming to Kushire for eye treatment, and the number of patients rose to over three lakh per month. On the face of it, this treatment appeared to be a charitable enterprise, as it cost a patient only one coconut. That this treatment netted the brothers Rs 18 lakh per month (three lakh coconuts multiplied by a cost of about Rs 6 per coconut) was forgotten.

The Kolhapur Municipal Corporation arranged for special bus services on Wednesdays and Sundays, the days of the treatment. The buses displayed boards saying, 'Let us go to Kushire and cure our eyes!' The local newspapers, some weeklies and local cable TV gave extensive publicity to the two brothers. Many rumours were spread. For instance, one rumour was that

people in queue for the treatment threw away their spectacles, sure that once the medicine was put into their eyes they would have no need of them. Another rumour was that two drops of the medicine made a cataract operation redundant. Then, of course, there was the rumour of blind people recovering their vision. In addition, it was also made known widely that the person who revealed the secret of this medicine and then disappeared had warned the brothers not to become greedy and that demanding money would result in loss of this knowledge.

I visited one such healing camp. About 10,000 people, all from rural areas, had arrived there for 'treatment'. The police personnel who had come there to control mischief and maintain order were making people stand in queues. Most of the people were about forty-five to fifty years old and uneducated. Quite a few women and very old people were there as well. All of them appeared to be very poor. Most of the women were anaemic, starved of vitamins, especially vitamin A that is essential for the eyes. The method of treating the patients was not just strange but atrocious. Ten to fifteen people were made to lie down in a row in a room or in the veranda with their heads to one side. No examination of any kind was conducted. The medicine was kept in a dirty vessel with an equally dirty cloth dipped in it. The wet cloth was then taken out and squeezed over the eyes of patients. Two drops were put in each patient's eyes. No one complained, because the treatment was simple, cheap and sanctified by its supposedly divine power.

The tremendous response to new of the treatment is a sign of the high prevalence of eye ailments in our society as well as the lack of facilities to treat these ailments. The number of patients was simply astounding. This method of treating eye ailments spread and clinics were opened at other places in Kolhapur district. All of them claimed to have inherited the knowledge directly from the Gurav brothers.

Meanwhile, the brothers announced that they did not have any branch anywhere. It created a controversy that was given publicity by the local newspapers. A report published in *Ratnagiri Times* from Alore on 16 September 1997 says, 'Many men, women and elderly people from the nooks and corners of the district have crowded into Alore. When asked why they were treating all ailments with the same medicine when the

ophthalmological institutes from Kolhapur and Pune have opposed it, the director of the camp, Ashokbhai, replied that the question will be answered by the enormity of the crowd. Then he added, doctors have looted these people several times while the treatment here is free and so the doctors are crying wolf. The patients were made to sign a printed form which said that every patient that comes here takes the treatment at their own risk and the attendants who administer the medicine will not be blamed if it is found defective.' A clever ploy indeed!

The report further added, 'Since there is no complaint of any dire consequence of the treatment, the opinion of the patients present there was that treatment with this medicine should continue. Many government servants and drivers of various vehicles have done away with their spectacles. Dr Ketkar, Dr Pawar, Dr Patel and Dr (Mrs) Mane have availed of this treatment. More than a thousand people take advantage of the treatment on any given day.'

Then, local social organisations began inviting the brothers to hold camps. In Math, a town in Lanja taluka of Ratnagiri district, a youth organisation called 'Sanmitra Mandal' invited the Gurav brothers to hold a camp there during their Navaratri festival celebrations. The camp site was crowded with jeeps, tempos, rickshaws, taxis and bikes since the early morning. More than 3,000 people from nearly a hundred nearby villages gathered. The camp was organised by a senior Shiv Sena worker, Sanjay Chavan. While as such, the two political parties, the Congress and the Shiv Sena, are sworn adversaries of each other, and the Republican Party abhors the Shiv Sena too, this socially useful camp brought them all together. A senior Congress leader, Mukundrao Sawant, inaugurated the camp. Republican party workers helped in its management. Newspapers reported that, despite opposition from the organisation of medical practitioners of Ratnagiri district and ANiS, people had attended the camp, completely ignoring their appeal. Such camps were then held in Kanakavali, in Sindhudurg district, Masoor, Dahivadi, Khandala, Phaltan and Medha in Satara district and several places in Pune and Solapur.

ANiS tried to oppose this unashamed cheating vehemently. Many other organisations helped ANiS branches active in their respective districts in confronting the camp managers. In

Kolhapur, the Janaswasthya Dakshata Samiti, an organisation active in the field of social health, and ANiS demanded that the government investigate the use and after-effects of this medicine on the eyes of people and save them from possible damage. But the Government Health Department did not care. The District Commissioner, Manukumar Shrivastav, and the Inspector of Police, Madhavrao Sanap, did not do anything whatsoever. Every department would shirk the responsibility and pass it on to some other department. Then ANiS took a firm stand against this fraud, first in Kolhapur and then in other places.

I met with Manukumar Shrivastav on 10 September 1997 along with some of our activists, and explained our stand. 'The government has declared that it will provide health facilities to all by the year 2000. But people like the Gurav brothers are interfering with people's health while the district commissioner looks on. This is not correct or acceptable. The medicine used by these brothers should be analysed, and they should be allowed to continue their treatment only when it proves not only harmless, but also beneficial for eye ailments,—this was our contention.

We had a plan ready, which we submitted to the district commissioner. The Gurav brothers ought to administer their medicine to a select few patients suffering from eye ailments under the supervision of eye specialists, we argued. If the patients were cured of their ailment and the medicine proved effective, only then should the brothers be allowed to continue their treatment. We also demanded that the name of the plant from which the medicine is made be revealed to the public. Whether it possesses any medicinal property for the treatment of eye ailments at all could be verified with the help of botany and ayurveda experts. If the brothers were worried that revealing the name of the plant would amount to giving up their business secret and would adversely affect their occupation, then ANiS was prepared to arrange to provide them with a temporary patent for their medicine. We also wanted to bring to their notice that treating patients with a medicine that had not undergone all the essential processes of validation was a culpable crime under the Drugs and Magic Remedies Act, 1954.

The district commissioner did not seem to be in favour of taking any positive action. He agreed only to prohibit this treatment till the reports of the tests were available. This report,

in fact, was not of much use because the medicine was ayurvedic and made of leaves. So all that could be verified was whether the medicine was harmful or not. The compulsory process that every allopathic medicine had to undergo before being introduced into the market does not apply to traditional ayurvedic medicines made from plants. However, although it was not possible to take action against the brothers on this account, they were surely guilty of producing medicine on a large scale without government authorisation and providing bogus treatment without any medical certification.

Since the government evaded taking action, the brothers restarted their business after a short gap. A delegation from Kushire then arrived at the district commissioner's office when we were holding another meeting with him. In their opinion, the Gurav brothers' discovery was a great boon to humanity. It would ease the government's responsibility regarding health, at least as far as eye care was concerned. Moreover, people opted for this treatment at their own risk, just like those who consumed the popular tobacco product gutkha. When the government does not ban gutkha, why should it ban this harmless medicine, they contended. They then said that, because of the success of the Gurav brothers' medicine, many others had begun offering eye treatment, claiming that they too had the knowledge of it. So, they had come to request the commissioner to put an end to the bogus business of these imposters.

What had happened was that one Baliram Chaugule, living in village Pohale, close to Kushire had claimed that it was he, who had first discovered the medicine. He, too, was organising camps in the Konkan area. Chagule, too, could not answer the questions posed to him: what is the expiry period of this medicine? Why is the colour of the medicine different at different times? Are these medicinal plants available at places other than the mountain of Jyotiba near Panhala? Like the brothers, he refused to give a sample for examination to the government. His camps were also overcrowded and many NGOs and political parties vied with each other to help this supposedly humanitarian campaign without giving a thought to its authenticity. ANiS demonstrated against such camps in Kanakavali (Sindhudurg district) and Jaysingpur (Kolhapur district). Some like-minded organisations and ophthalmologists

supported ANiS. But the mad rush for eye treatment with the untested medicine did not abate. People could not understand why ANiS was obstructing this apparent good work.

In Satara district, these questionable eye camps began to be held at several places simultaneously. Despite my disappointing experience with the Kolhapur district administration, I went to see the District Police Superintendent, Meera Boravankar, along with some eye specialists. I pointed out that curing all sorts of eye ailments with just one drop of a single medicine is a miraculous and supernatural treatment. The law provides for strict action against such treatment. I also pointed out that a coconut, or cash in lieu of the coconut, collected from every individual totals up to several thousand rupees per day in every camp. Dr Saravate, the eye specialist who accompanied our delegation, explained how badly the medicine can and already has affected some patients. We also brought to her notice the fact that the Ophthalmologists' Organisation of Maharashtra had publicly denounced it and demanded that action be taken against the perpetrators of this crime.

Surprisingly, the superintendent, unlike those of other districts, was convinced, and promptly issued a circular to all police stations as follows:

No. Wafi/364/97
Satara, dated 27th October 1997
Sub:-Re stopping illegal treatment of eyes.

Circular

In various parts of Satara district, camps for treatment of all eye ailments are being conducted on a large scale. The person who treats the patients has no medical certificate. Just one drop of the medicine is put into the eyes of the patient, once a week, whatever is the disease. This medicine is neither licensed nor produced by medical experts. This treatment has been publicised as a divine miracle. Propagating any treatment in this manner is a cognisable crime under the Drugs and Magic Remedies (Objectionable Advertisement) Act, 1954. Similarly to accept money or things from patients

for such treatment is plain deceit. The patient is likely to lose his vision by such treatment. Chiefs of all police stations should investigate thoroughly and take appropriate preventive action against those persons who offer this illegal treatment. Similarly, if ANiS activists contact the police station in connection with this treatment or make a complaint in this regard, they should be given complete cooperation and proper action should be taken promptly.
By order Police Superintendent, Satara
Copy to all police stations, etc. etc. Satara.

This circular proved an effective weapon for us not only in Satara but also in other districts of Maharashtra, like Pune, Solapur, Osmanabad and Ahmednagar, where this illegal act was beginning to spread. Our activists met with the chief police officers of the concerned place with a copy of this circular and requested them to issue similar circulars. With the help of such circulars, we successfully closed down one camp after another. However, in Kolhapur district, no such circular was ever issued.

The crowds gathering at Kushire for the treatment of eyes by the so-called ‘medicine that brings the dead eyes to life’ (Netra Sanjeevani) dwindled, but it had taken a great deal of effort, time, wisdom and money from innumerable people!

15

The Challenge of Divine Wrath

As part of an ANiS campaign called 'In Search of Truth', where lectures on issues of rationality and science were organised, my programme, 'Vada-Samvad' (Dialogue), was arranged in the town library of Kudal in the month of January 1996. Kudal is in the Sindhudurg district of Maharashtra. There, a gentleman by the name of Vikas Gavande obstructed the discussion, challenging our avowal that miracles do not happen. 'The living deity at Dungeshwar is an example that contradicts your conviction,' he said and added further, 'If you have the guts, go and defy the custom at the Devasthan (temple), the deity will punish you so severely that you will remember it for the rest of your life. Your "causality" is worth nothing there. So, if you have the courage, accept the challenge and experience the deity's wrath'. I accepted Mr Gavande's challenge and declared it in the evening assembly to a large gathering.

The Dungeshwar temple is also located in the same district. In the Vengurla taluka of Sindhudurg district, there is a hill that resembles a tortoise shell. Three villages—Kochara, Shriramvadi and Kille Nivati—are situated on three of its sides. The fourth slope is very close to the sea. On the west side, at the foot of this hill is the Dungeshwar temple. To reach this temple, one has to take a secluded thorny path, braving overgrown creepers, branches and fallen trees. Near the seashore, one has to cross a stream to reach the temple.

The temple itself is a simple structure. It is merely a black stone about a foot and a half tall and half a foot wide, firmly set in the ground. There is no building as such. This is the Dungeshwar deity. There is a copper vessel hung above this stone for ceremonial ablutions of the deity. In front of it, slightly to its

right are two hooded cobra figurines made of silver. Beside these cobras is a small Shiva linga. Behind the stone, innumerable saffron flags have been planted in the soil. In the small courtyard in front of the stone, garlands of bells made of brass have been hung on the branches of trees. When the wind blows, these bells begin to ring and the atmosphere becomes rather eerie and grim.

There are many scary notions regarding this deity in the surrounding areas. Plucking even one green leaf from the Dungeshwar Rai—the greenery of Dungeshwar—is considered a grave sin. If someone plucks a leaf or a branch of a tree even by mistake, he is, it is said, sure to be possessed by some vicious entity or the other. Hence, no one dares commit this sin because of which the greenery in this area has remained intact for ages. Forget only leaves and branches, carrying away any object at all from this temple is said to beget the deity's wrath. It is said that if one takes away the bells hung there, one will be possessed or suffer severely in some other way within three months.

The sea comes almost right up to the hill where this temple is situated. The hill is surrounded by clean white sand on all other sides. The endless deep blue sea, a tiny island with a lighthouse in this blue stretch, an unfinished fort from Shivaji's time and the white sand all around make this place a visual treat.

It is an ANiS practice to agree on a procedure for the challenges we accept. The procedure has to be acceptable to both parties. It is then put on paper, signed by both parties and declared publicly. A draft of this procedure was given to Vikas Gavande. It read: 'You have to obtain written permission from the trustees of the said Devasthan to complete the challenge procedure. In case there is no board of trustees in place, the concerned gram panchayat (village local administration committee) should pass a resolution in consultation with the people to allow the process of challenge. The "No Objection" letter should explicitly mention that no one will accuse us of upsetting the prevailing systems and customs or insulting the deity, so as not to leave any scope for any complaints later.'

The challenges we had accepted at Shri Dungeshwar (Shriramvadi) Kochare were as follows.

1) Ten ANiS activists from Maharashtra would each pick up one bell from the temple and carry it home. As per the prevailing

belief, they all would suffer so much that within three months they would be compelled to return the bell to the temple. But if none of these activists suffer, they would not return the bells, and ANiS will be declared successful.

2) Our activist would spend the night in the temple to dispel any notions of macabre activities in the temple. In the concerned place where our activist would sleep, the Samiti would make necessary lighting arrangements. Activists, journalists and police would stay twenty feet away from this place to avoid any intentional outside interference.

This was the procedure agreed upon for meeting the challenge of divine wrath. During the action, necessary changes could be made in the details of the procedure with the consent of both parties. It was also agreed that all the steps of the procedure would be carried out in a controlled environment and in the presence of journalists and policemen.

After this was reported, a war of words broke out among the people, which was reported in newspapers in Sindhudurg district. The whole district of Sindhudurg was astonished by our acceptance of the challenge and were eagerly waiting to see if we could defy the age-old jinx of Dungeshwar.

On 11 April, ANiS activists from Sindhudurg and other parts of Maharashtra proceeded towards Dungeshwar from Kudal. They met Vikas Gavande, who had challenged ANiS to defy the curse, at Pat. He insisted that, since Dungeshwar was the village deity of Kochara and Shriramvadi, the activists should proceed to the temple through these two villages. The activists, who had spent years in the movement, immediately sensed why he was making this suggestion; by taking the route he was suggesting, the activists would run the risk of confronting angry villagers who would create tension and hamper the challenge process. They ignored his suggestion and chose to go via Kille Nivati.

The group reached the temple by 12.30 p.m. People around were under the impression that ANiS would withdraw from the challenge at the eleventh hour for some flimsy reason or the other. Hence, only a few villagers, journalists and police personnel were present.

I then spoke to them.

‘We want to examine if any divine wrath that is not

consistent with the law of causality can occur here. We are absolutely sure that no such thing is possible. But here, if only one of us picks up a bell and by chance his bike skids and he falls down, it will be considered divine wrath. In order to avoid misunderstanding through any such coincidence, we have deliberately chosen to have a total of thirteen activists to take away a bell each, and in some cases, even two bells. We will not complain if any divine wrath befalls us. However, if just a couple of us meet with any mishap, it shouldn't be considered divine wrath. If the majority of us suffer from any misfortune in the next three months, then we will accept the existence of the living deity and its wrath.' The activists then took twenty-two bells out of the thousands hanging on the branches of the trees and went home. They hung those bells in their homes without any trepidation whatsoever. The members of their families cheerfully supported them. Professor Shrikant Savant from Kudal had picked up a small bell which his daughter liked very much. She wanted her father to bring home many more such bells for her.

Our next expedition was to Devabhaum (Bhaum) in Andurle village, also in Vengurla taluka. Here, there is a large stream with tall trees on both banks. By on the side of the stream that was at a slightly higher elevation, there were smooth tiles of different colours. On the tiles, there were four stones marked with a tila (a circular mark of red lead or a similar substance). These deities (the stones) had only the sky above for their roof. A horde of ten paise coins and many bundles of incense sticks lay heaped in front of them. An appeal for kaul (consulting the deity as to whether one should go ahead with a specific action or not) is made tat this place. The income of the temple was then about a thousand rupees a day. The belief was that, because god had ordered the temple to be completed in just one day, the temple would forever remain an open structure, only partially built up, since only the walls on four sides could be built in a day. This deity is also said to abhor noise, and if anybody dares make a loud noise there, the deity deals with him appropriately.

Here too, we had accepted a challenge which was as follows:

- Five activists of ANiS would beat the concerned drum for ten minutes each. None of them would surrender to the deity for the suffering caused.

While we were not bothered about being dealt with by the deity when we had decided to beat drums there, we were concerned about upsetting honeybees, in case there were honeycombs in the trees! We should really have investigated this beforehand. But it was too late then, and we had to prepare ourselves to carry out the challenge procedure, bees or no bees. What a relief it was when we reached the spot and found that there were no bees.

There were crowds on both sides of the path as we walked towards the temple. Since emotional and religious feelings were involved, we had asked the Vengurla police station to take precautionary measures. But none of them were present. However, two policemen of the Mhapan outpost arrived, and just in case something untoward happened, we at least had these two policemen as government witnesses. We beat drums in front of the temple from 6 p.m. onwards. A few lady activists too had accompanied us, and they beat drums quite enthusiastically. A few students from the local high school also tried their hand at beating the drums.

We went back to the Dungeshwar temple at 6 p.m. on 12 April. We were in all twenty-three activists and a few journalists. Except for an electric torch, no other source of light was available there. We had considered all possible predicaments. After we lifted the bells, the atmosphere had become very tense. We were sure that the deity would not pose any hazard, but people might; so we decided to keep a watch on both the paths that led to the temple. There was also a possibility that someone would climb the cliff adjacent to the temple and throw stones from there. So three of us climbed this difficult cliff and stayed there. To signal each other, we set up a system of whistle signals. After making all these arrangements, we sat down in front of Dungeshwar and began to chat. As it became darker and darker on all sides, it dawned on us that we had actually exposed ourselves to a great deal of risk. There were lots of big and small rounded stones in the bed of the stream. It was the summer season and the Konkan area at this time is infested with snakes. What would we do if one of us was bitten by a snake or was wounded, while asleep, by a stone thrown from the surrounding jungle? Both these cases would have been taken as the proof of the deity's wrath. Of course, none of us was scared; we were only

aware of how grave the situation was.

Gudaji Guruji from Patan was to sleep in front of the deity, while rest of us were going to stay some 20 feet from him. At 10 p.m., we heard the sounds of a few people hurriedly approaching the place of challenge. Arriving there, they argued that since Advocate Parulekar had thrown the challenge, it ought to be him who had to sleep in front of the deity and the rest of us should remain not 20 feet, but 200 feet away from him. All these terms and conditions had been written down and agreed to, prior to the commencement of the challenge. We also had with us the written statement to that effect signed by both sides, which we showed them. But they were bent on arguing. So, in order not to hamper the challenge process but to take it to fruition, we decided to give in. Advocate Parulekar slept in front of the deity all alone, and the rest of us shifted to the dry bed of the stream from where neither Dungeshwar nor Advocate Parulekar could be seen through the thick foliage of the jungle.

As the night advanced, the activists relaxed a bit. Suddenly, around 2.30 a.m., a gang of ten to fifteen people arrived with the clear intention of picking up a quarrel and a scuffle if necessary. They argued that we were making a mockery of their deity and that they would not tolerate it. They ordered us to stop the farce and threatened us by saying that in case we didn't comply, they 'knew how to tackle people like us'. I talked to them quite coolly, 'Look here, the person you should hold responsible for all this is Vikas Gavande. It was he who challenged us in the first place. When we accepted his challenge, it was well advertised and discussed in the newspapers, after which we obtained permission from all concerned and also informed the police about our action. After meticulously going through all these steps we have arrived here. The whole of last month, in fact even till this evening you did not care to speak out about your objection. Then why at this midnight hour, do you suddenly come to fisticuffs? We are "satyagrahis". Beat us if you like; we will not resist. But come what may, we will not leave this place till six in the morning.' These words of conviction calmed them down a bit. Then I tried to explain ANiS's stand to them. 'We at ANiS have utmost reverence for people's sentiments for their deities. If we have hurt your feelings in any way, I am extremely sorry and apologise for that. But let it be clear why we had to go through

this procedure. It is because we were challenged, and secondly, we do not recognise this kind of a god, who without any rhyme or reason, wants to teach an injurious lesson to an innocent man just for sleeping in front of him. Our saints too have refuted such a god. All we want to do is to prove that no miracle is possible disregarding scientific laws. We are not concerned about the existence or non-existence of god.' The villagers, satisfied, turned back. However, till morning, people kept coming in groups to verify whether Parulekar was really sleeping in front of the deity. The challenge procedure came to a close at 6 a.m. on 13 April.

Most people did not expect ANiS to pass this test of challenge so successfully, and with such conviction. Now they could not deny the fact. To save his reputation, Vikas Gavande had to declare, 'Before giving the challenge, I had asked for the deity's "kaul" (verdict on whether he should or should not challenge the ANiS), which was in the affirmative. So I can, without any trepidation, reaffirm that all those who took away bells or slept in front of the deity will meet their just desserts tomorrow, if not today.' People in the surrounding villages believed that although the arrogant ANiS activists met the challenge, the wrath of Dungeshwar would not let them escape. Some also believed that, since Vikas Gavande had initiated this commotion, Dungeshwar would punish him first. But everybody was very sure that justice would be done within three months.

The newly established Dharmarakshaka Samiti (Committee for the Protection of Religion) now gave matters an ugly turn in a public meeting, where the topic of discussion was 'Defilement of the Dungeshwar temple by ANiS'. Slogans calling for purification of Dungeshwar and Bhaum were shouted. In this meeting, D.D. Desai, the chief of the Sindhudurg branch of the Shiv Sena, declared that ANiS with its unreasonably extremist stand regarding the two temples—Dungeshwar and Bhaum—had hurt the religious sentiments of the devout population in this area. Simultaneously, he warned that he would shave the heads of ANiS activists, blacken their faces and lead them round the city mounted backwards on donkeys. Around 300–400 people who had attended this meeting passed a unanimous resolution to take legal action against these workers. They also declared that a grand programme of purification of these two temples defiled by ANiS activists and charity (to brahmins) would soon be

organised. They accused ANiS activists of indulging in tricks, under the guise of dedication to science, only to gain cheap publicity. This, they said, was highly objectionable.

However, the inside story was that there was a Muslim ANiS activist in the team. So, we were accused of sending a non-Hindu to remove a bell from the Dungeshwar temple and to defile it. They also clarified that they were concerned with who defiled the temple, and not who threw the challenge. They also threatened that no ANiS activist would be allowed to work anywhere in Maharashtra.

These angry men could have vitiated the atmosphere, but fortunately, an advocates' delegation happened to meet the then minister-in-charge of Sindhudurg district, Narayan Rane, a Shiv Sena MLA. The Dungeshwar episode too came up in the discussion. And, to every one's surprise, Narayan Rane literally hit a sixer! In a moment, the problem was solved. He sharply reprimanded everyone and said, 'I totally disagree with the speeches made in the public meeting organised by the "Dharmarakshak Samiti". I do not discriminate between Hindus and Muslims. Many of my workers are Muslims. Moreover, we fully support the work being done by the ANiS as is the policy of the government.' On receiving this rejoinder from a member of their own family, all those who were threatening us had to cool down.

When the Mahabharata's Pandavas had to live incognito for a year, they were constantly worried that someone would discover who they were. Not unlike them, our thirteen activists lived in fear that if, by chance, any of them met with an accident or some other misfortune, it would be attributed to the wrath of the deity. But fortunately, nothing happened during the next three months. The challenge process was now complete. But due to heavy downpours in the monsoon, we had to extend the period of returning the bells to six months. At the end of the six-month period, I went to Kudal and further to Dungeshwar with all the activists and the twenty-two bells they had picked up from the temple. There, while talking to the journalists, I said, 'Not a single activist or any of the members of his family has suffered from anything whatsoever during these last six months. Any of you can verify this fact as a neutral party. I want to stress that ANiS respects people's devotion to god. But the notion of

divine wrath goes against the law of causality and is discordant with the concept of god as auspiciousness and benevolence personified. In accepting the challenge, we aimed at explicitly bringing out this fact before the people. Now that we have achieved what we set out to achieve, we have returned the bells to where they belong. This act will make it clear to the people how respectfully and constructively we deal with their religious sentiments.'

16
Phony Godmen

It was the year 1999. Narendra Maharaj, a popular baba, was rapidly spreading his tentacles all over the Konkan region, Goa and western Maharashtra. Large numbers of people rushed to his base, Nanij in Ratnagiri district, Maharashtra for treatment and blessings. *Narendra Leelamrit* (The Invigorating Pursuits of Narendra), a book written on him and published in the name of his wife, had become a point of heated discussion. This book contained accounts of innumerable miracles performed by the maharaj that surpassed all the incredible stories so far told and retold. ANiS strongly objected to the claims of miracles made in this book, because they encouraged a superstitious mindset. The Janajagaran Samiti (Association for Awakening) of Konkan too had started a movement against this miracle-mongering.

ANiS took a firm stand in this regard. It demanded that, since Narendra Maharaj had never actually explained the miracles he is supposed to have performed as detailed in the book, he ought to come forward and verify publicly the truth of his miracles so loudly extolled by his devotees. The whole of Konkan was agitated about this public confrontation with the maharaj. The atmosphere was tense, but also full of curiosity. The district administrator and the chief police officer held a joint meeting with ANiS and the devotees of the maharaj and decided upon the rules to be followed during the question–answer session. According to this, ANiS was required to give seven questions in writing, which the maharaj too would answer in writing. Twenty-five members from each side would attend the meeting. The maharaj insisted on receiving the list of questions during the course of the meeting itself. But ANiS took the stand that, since the questions would be based on his book *Narendra*

Leelamrit , there was no need to submit them in advance. Finally, it was decided to give the list of questions fifteen minutes before the programme.

Twenty-five of us, all ANiS activists, reached the venue in the afternoon. Ten thousand devotees from faraway distances had gathered on the hill where the math was situated. It is said that the maharaj had issued a 'whip' to all his devotees to be present on the occasion. There was massive police bandobast. At 11.45 a.m., we handed over a list of questions to a representative of the maharaj in the presence of the tehsildar. At 12.02 a.m., Narendra Maharaj arrived at Kunjavan, the venue of the programme, with a notepad containing his written answers to our questions. We were welcomed by a physician from Kolhapur, who told us that Narendra Maharaj was a follower of the glorious path of spirituality that was a practice of Indian culture from ancient times.

I then began asking questions by reading them from the list one by one; and Narendra Maharaj answered them in that order. Seven questions were asked and answered. But before the questions were asked, I presented the following preamble to the programme explaining our stand. I said, 'Narendra Maharaj, for the last two years, we have been challenging you through public meetings and letters in the newspapers to validate the claims of miracles that you performed and are described in the book *Narendra Leelamrit* . But you have failed to answer any questions all this while. So I am compelled to ask you these questions in writing publicly. If you do not answer these questions satisfactorily or avoid answering them and abandon the meeting, it will be declared as your inability to do so. With this public clarification I am going to ask the questions.

'You are expected to give a quick, precise and written answer. Journalists will be given photocopies of your written answers, so that no one will have any reason to complain. We are meeting here to obtain explanations to the objections raised by ANiS against you time and again. If maharaj wants to ask any questions to ANiS, he is most welcome to the ANiS Central Office at Satara, where all his questions will be answered in writing. The date of the visit for this purpose can be fixed at this meeting.'

Saying this, I proceeded to ask the questions:

1) ‘The book, *Narendra Leelamrit* has been published by Mrs Supriya N. Sule, the wife of Narendra Maharaj, on behalf of the Narendra Maharaj Trust, Nanij, of which Shri Narendra Maharaj is the trustee. So, whatever is written in the book must be authorised and official. In the first line of the preface of this book, it is mentioned that Narendra Maharaj is the latest incarnation of Gajanan Maharaj. Does Narendra Maharaj, too, claim to be the incarnation of Gajanan Maharaj? However, Shri Gajanan Sansthan of Shegaon has declared that the person who claims to be the incarnation of Gajanan Maharaj is a fraud. What is your opinion regarding this?
2) ‘In Chapter 19 , page 200 of the first edition of the book, it is mentioned that to cure the white spots on the skin of Mrs Madhavi Mohan Limaye, sister-in-law of Mr Limaye, she was given a blow after which the white spots disappeared. Mrs Limaye, in her press release to the newspapers as well as in her public speech, has declared the above account to be a blatant lie. So we want to ask Narendra Maharaj, why does he lie so blatantly and is it proper to give a blow to a lady in this manner?
3) ‘In this book it is also mentioned that the relatives of Shri Subhash Kadam and the sister-in-law of Shri Pandurang Bhandari were revived by the maharaj after they were declared dead (Chapter 2 , page 14 and Chapter 9 , page 79, both first edition). ANiS has repeatedly had asked for evidence that these individuals had actually been declared dead by a qualified doctor after a proper medical examination, and that the maharaj had actually revived them after that. But no such evidence has been offered for the last two years. If Narendra Maharaj fails to provide any evidence regarding this claim even today, the Samiti will deem this to be a lie. Does the maharaj have anything to offer by way of clarification in this regard?
4) ‘Sunanda D. Bhagawat from Nanij and Geeta Radye from Mekhi had lost all their hair and become bald. But because of blessings by the maharaj, Sunanda’s hair began to grow within three days, while Geeta took seven visits to overcome her baldness. This claim is made in the fifth chapter of the book (pages 42–43, first edition). To verify his power in this connection, we wish to send five bald individuals to the

maharaj. If their hair begins to grow and reaches about a handspan in length within three days or after seven visits, as mentioned in *Narendra Leelamrit* , ANiS will defer to the maharaj and become his devotees. But in case it does not happen, the maharaj will have to apologise to the people for deceiving them. Does maharaj agree to this? If the maharaj claims that only his devotees can benefit from his blessings and not ANiS workers, he may name five bald individuals from his devotees attending today's meeting and arrange to grow hair on their heads within fifteen days, or accept that he is deceiving people by spreading false stories of his miracles. What is the response of the maharaj?

5) 'On page 181 of Chapter 18 of this book (first edition), one more incredible claim is made. It says Narendra Maharaj knows a mantra that annuls the effects of snakebite, and he has taught this mantra to Arvind Pandit. We request the maharaj to prove this power of his publicly in the meeting. Maharaj can choose the devotees himself and the Samiti will provide poisonous snake. The devotees who offer to be bitten by the snake and the maharaj who claims to save them with his divine power will be solely responsible for whatever consequences may occur. The names of the devotees willing to undertake this test can be declared and the date of the experiment fixed in today's meeting. Does maharaj agree to this?
6) 'All the contents of the book *Narendra Leelamrit* , which is available widely, obviously pertain to Narendra Maharaj, since it is published by the wife of the maharaj on behalf of the Narendra Maharaj Trust, Nanij. The maharaj should accept this fact (regarding the ridiculously exaggerated claims) or withdraw the book from the market, and apologise to those individuals who suffered by believing in his divine powers and compensate for their loss. Does the maharaj agree?
7) 'In the *Narendra Gatha* journal, August 1998 issue, published by your trust, it is mentioned (on pages 15 and 19) that a world war will break out on 19 July 1999. Only those people who are the devotees of the maharaj and those whom the maharaj wants to save will survive the disaster. The maharaj should reveal whatever scientific evidence he has regarding this, and in case it does not happen, tell the public what

punishment he should be given for raising panic and deceiving people.'

The Maharaj refused to keep his promise of giving answers in writing right at the beginning. But since the whole programme was being videofilmed, ANiS did not insist on written answers.

In answering the first question, Narendra Maharaj accepted that he does not call himself the incarnation of Gajanan Maharaj; but, he added, 'The people think me to be his incarnation. This book is a compilation of the experiences of my devotees and the stories told by them.' To the next question, he totally denied having given a blow to Mrs Madhavi Limaye. (However, as soon as we left, he announced to his devotees that he had to give a blow to Mrs Limaye for her spiritual enhancement.)

His reply to the third question was quite peculiar. The maharaj explained, 'Those individuals were not declared dead by the doctor; the villagers thought that they were dead. The doctors had given up all hope and the relatives of those individuals fell at my feet and would not let go of me. I told them that I was helpless and that they should go back. However, the person whom the relatives mistook for dead, gradually recovered. I don't know the causality of this entire episode.'

The fourth question too was answered in the same manner; that is, maharaj himself did not claim any miracles or miraculous powers. The miracle happened to be the experience of the devotees. All his answers denied any miracles whatsoever. Now, whether this is accepting defeat or trying to escape from the challenge, will have to be left to the reader to decide. While answering the fifth question, he said, 'Look here, I am a spiritual man. Thousands and thousands of people come here. There are cases of snakebites too among them. I do not keep an account of who recovered from the bite and do not claim to neutralise the poison of any snakes. Let the people decide whether the book should continue or be withdrawn from the market; who are you or who am I to decide?'

To answer the sixth question, he explained, 'The *Gathas* (anthologies of the works of many saints) are compiled by devotees on the basis of their own experiences.' The last question he answered somewhat differently. He said, 'Regarding the Third World War, I received a clear indication during my spiritual

retreat that it would break out in the middle of 1999.' He also clarified that there was no intention of scaremongering in this. On the contrary, it was an attempt to establish peace. To top it all, Narendra Maharaj declared that he too was working to eradicate superstition, and the veterans among ANiS activists should guide him in this effort. The maharaj who had arrived with his notepad to answer our questions looked terrified at the end of the session. His hand holding the notepad trembled; his teeth clattered and he kept asking for water all the time.

After the question–answer session of the challenge process was over, we returned to Ratnagiri. There, in a press conference, we exhibited the film of the whole episode. The next day, many newspapers published the news on their front pages to the effect that the claim of miracles that had been made by Narendra Maharaj had been totally defeated.

17

Lord Ganesh Drinks Milk

It was 9.30 on the morning of 21 September 1995 when I received a call from my brother in Delhi. He thought there was an urgent assignment for me there. Something unusual seemed to be happening. People in Delhi were rushing out of their houses to witness the whole family of Lord Shankar along with the cobra round his neck and the bull in front of him drinking milk from the hands of mere mortals!

From 11 a.m. onwards, my phone began to ring continuously to give me the same news from Satara. Investigating this miraculous phenomenon was now unavoidable. But that was going to be difficult. A proper investigation into this matter would require controlled conditions in which it could be conducted. The followers of Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), the Bajrang Dal, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) (supposedly non-political organisations who dabble in politics) and the Shiv Sena were all very enthusiastically feeding milk to idols of Lord Ganesh and hailing the miracle. It was clear that they would never allow any proper investigation. Many ANiS activists, on their own initiative, visited Ganesh temples and observed the situation there. At some places, a white towel had been tied below the mouth of the idol. In some temples the idol was wiped dry every now and then. In yet other temples, the boisterous crowd made it impossible to carry milk in a spoon, as it spilled before reaching the idol. But the devotee wouldn't notice that, and went home satisfied that his spoon had been emptied by Ganesh! When the idol was washed, milk drained from the gomukh (cow's mouth—the outlet for the water draining from the idol). All this was noticed by the activists as well as journalists. There was a lot of confusion everywhere.

The Satara district chief of police was not present when this happened. So, I rang up the city chief to talk about investigating this incident. He was already overwhelmed, and had been arranging for policemen to manage the situation at various temples. At the same time, he was also confused about whether or not he should interfere, this being a religious matter. As a result, the investigation procedure had to be postponed.

Phone calls then began coming in from all over Maharashtra. They all wanted to know ANiS's reaction to this miraculous happening. ANiS activists from Pune, Dapoli, Solapur, Latur and Jalgaon got in touch. At 6 p.m., the news editor of Mumbai Doordarshan rang up. He had a film clip showing how the milk in the spoon gradually disappeared on being applied to the trunk of the Ganesh idol. While telecasting this news, he wanted to telecast my reaction to this phenomenon too. I told him, 'Let us agree about the fact that the quantity of milk in the spoon reduces. But how can this mean that the idol drinks the milk?' In my view, that there was milk draining from the spoon was not evidence that the god was actually drinking the milk. He seemed convinced about this point. It appeared to me that he stressed this in the 7 p.m. news.

Besides that, I also spoke about a few more things. Firstly, I told him that, in my view, all of this seemed to be a well-planned hoax. Secondly, it was my view that, as stipulated in the Constitution, it was obligatory for every citizen to adopt a scientific approach to the matter. This miracle seemed to be against the principles of scientific reason. Therefore, it was now the responsibility of the government to investigate the matter. Lastly, I announced an open challenge. Whoever performed this miracle in front of us would win a prize of Rs 5 lakh from ANiS. The newsreader read my full response back to me to ensure that it was worded exactly the way I wanted it to be. It was then prominently broadcast in the Doordarshan evening news.

By now, reporters from many newspapers had gathered in the Satara police station. We all went to the temple in the Bhadaji Maharaj Math. Apparently, the idols of Lord Rama, Sita and Maruti too had begun drinking milk here. A reputed advocate was trying to convince us of the miracle. The garbhagriha (the sanctuary of the temple where idols are placed) was very small. But the pavilion outside was jam-packed with

mostly women and some men. I took a glass filled with milk and put its rim to the lips of the idol of Rama. Nothing happened, not a drop disappeared. The same story was repeated with the idols of Sita and Maruti. Everyone was surprised.

Then I was coaxed into using a spoon instead of a glass. So I took a spoon of milk and tried to feed it to the gods, but the result was the same. Not a single drop of milk was consumed by the idols. All the journalists and even the police officer tried their hands at feeding milk to the idols. But the idols refused to drink even a drop of it. All this was being videographed. The confused advocate now took a spoonful of milk in his hands, and pressed the edge of the spoon on the split between the lips of the Rama idol. The milk in the spoon reduced. But under the spoon, resting on the idol, I had placed my finger. The milk fell on my finger which was clearly noticed by everyone present. The advocate then made a determined last attempt. This time I held an empty spoon under his spoon instead of my finger. The advocate's spoon emptied but the same amount of milk collected in my spoon. The situation was now becoming tense. People began shouting slogans against ANiS. We retreated from the temple and returned to the police station. Representatives of Akashvani were waiting there to meet us. They interviewed us and broadcast our views on the 9.30 p.m. news. As a fallout of that, enraged VHP activists threatened the Akashvani employees on the phone.

People at various places had their own ideas about how to prove these miracles as false. In Satara, one of our activists told the crowd, 'Why take a spoonful of milk? Let us apply just two drops of milk to the lips of the idol and if the idol drinks it, that's the end of the matter.' Two drops were applied on the lips of the idol. They remained there for half an hour by which time the devotees became tired and all their enthusiasm petered out.

It is necessary to note here that the two phenomena of surface tension and capillary action can commence only when the milk touches wet lips. The idols refused to oblige us by drinking milk from the glass or the spoon because we took precautions not to fill the spoon and the glass to the brim and to hold the glass or spoon straight, so that the milk could not touch the lips. The lips of the idols were wiped dry and only the rim of the glass and not the milk itself could touch them. Hence, the surface tension broke and the flow of the fluid could not

commence. One of our Muslim activists was in a real dilemma. He could not accept that the miracle had happened, but at the same time, denying it involved hurting Hindu sentiments. He then thought of a very clever reply. 'Look here,' he said, 'Ganapati is your god of intelligence. Even a small child knows that drinking milk with one's nose is very dangerous, for it will enter the lungs and endanger life. Now Lord Ganapati's nose is his trunk. How can the god of intelligence drink milk with his nose which, being dangerous, even a child would not attempt? Shouldn't he drink milk with his mouth instead of his trunk?' Another ANiS activist remarked, 'One big benefit of this milk-drinking by gods is that foreign investors will not think twice before investing here, because people elsewhere are not cheated so easily.'

Spreading lies is the trump card our detractors hold. A rumour was spread in Satara that I had offered milk to the god and the god had drunk it. It was also said that I had told people that, in order to learn how the gods drank the milk, the idols had to be smashed. On the basis of this rumour, notices were displayed at many places in Satara declaring that my head would be smashed, since I had dared to talk in this fashion. Arrangements to burn my effigy were made and a case was filed against me in Nashik.

I believed that it was very important for the government to investigate how the rumour of the idols drinking milk spread all over the country and abroad so quickly and systematically. The enthusiastic response that this had received from the public was partly understandable, but the fact that had come to light was that people can be easily aroused and this, in my opinion, was very dangerous. Once this is known, it can be used to create unrest in the country by spreading such rumours. On the behest of ANiS, many eminent persons from Maharashtra wrote personally to the then Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao to institute a Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) inquiry into this episode. The gist of their letters was as below:

'On the 21st of September, the so-called miracle of the idols of deities drinking milk took place. There was tremendous commotion engulfing the whole country. All this, in my opinion, was a well-planned sham. It is a very serious matter, as a lot of time, money, effort and sense of all Indians has been sacrificed

by this mischief. It is essential that the matter is investigated by the CBI.' It further said, 'Indian citizens are expected to adopt a scientific approach and inquisitive mindset by the Constitution of India. But such miracles create an altogether contrary ambience that certainly needs investigation. Now is the time to think and prepare ourselves to nip in the bud this kind of rumour-mongering, quickly and effectively, as soon as it is generated, with the help of the media and government machinery.'

Those who sent such letters to the Samiti included eminent personalities like Dr Vasant Govarikar, Dr Jayant Narlikar, P.L. Deshpande, Narayan Surve, Ram Shevalkar, Anil Avachat, Vasant Bapat, Dr Shreeram Lagoo, Nilu Phule, Jayantrao Tilak, Mohan Dharia, Dr Baba Adhav, Bhai Vaidya, G.P. Pradhan, Kamal Vichare, Taher Poonawala, Daddy Deshmukh, Vidya Bal, Pushpa Bhave, Gajanan Khatu, Justice Jahagirdar, Dr Satyaranjan Sathe, Mukundrao Kirloskar, Sadanand Varde, Pannalal Surana, Professor Hatkananglekar, Bharat Patankar, Govindrao Shinde, Bagaram Tulpule and Prabhubhai Sanghvi.

ANiS sent all these letters collectively to the Prime Minister with my covering letter that mentioned additionally, 'This episode of miracle, in the opinion of ANiS, has sullied India's image in the world. We request you to kindly inform us of your reaction to it and take proper action as requested in the accompanying letters.' The Prime Minister's office did not care to reply to or even acknowledge the letter.

18
The Award That I Chose Not to Accept

The Maharashtra government had selected my book *Ladhe Andhashraddheche* (Battles against Superstition) for the award of 'Best Production' for the year 1999–2000. The then Chief Minister Vilasrao Deshmukh was to present this award to me. The award was in the name of 'Satyashodhak Krantisinha' (Seeker of Truth and Lion of Revolution) Nana Patil.

I then wrote the following letter to the Chief Minister:

To
Respected Shri Vilasrao Deshmukh,
Chief Minister,
Maharashtra State.

Sir,
My book, *Ladhe Andhashraddheche* has been chosen for the 'Best Production' award of the year 1999–2000 by the Maharashtra State government. I am happy that my book is considered good enough for this award. Shri N.N. Patel, Commissioner, Department of Cultural Affairs, has informed me that this book is going to be released by you on 25 November at Aurangabad. However, I have, with a heavy heart, decided not to receive this award from you. I hope you will kindly understand. Hence this letter.

I have been working full time for Andhashraddha Nirmoolan Samiti (ANiS) for the last several years. The above award-winning book describes some battles we have waged against superstitions. In addition, since this award has been instituted in the name of the dynamic

and valiant revolutionary, Nana Patil, it is a special honour for me. But considering all this, my acceptance of this award at the hands of a Chief Minister like you, who publicly indulges in and supports superstitious actions, will be, in my opinion, most improper. Your visit to meet Sathya Sai Baba while the Legislative Assembly Session was on, falling at his feet, accepting the gold chain he conjured from thin air as 'divine blessings', instead of recognising it for the cheap magic trick that it was, and then to pre-emptively stop demonstrations against these acts of yours by arresting ANiS activists from Latur and Nanded districts, who intended to peacefully demonstrate, are clearly actions that encourage superstition. Given this background, accepting the award at your hands would be contrary to the thoughts expressed in this book. I have no complaints if my refusal to accept the award leads to cancellation of my selection for it.

Our leader, Mrs Indira Gandhi, by her amendment to the Constitution in 1976, has included fostering scientific approach as a duty of every Indian citizen. By acknowledging Sathya Sai Baba's miracle-mongering, you are renouncing the duty stipulated for every citizen of this country. If you agree with us on this point, you should take a stand explicitly against buvabaji and miracle-mongering. In case you do so, I will be extremely happy to receive the award from you. Kindly excuse me for being so tersely unequivocal.

Yours,
Narendra Dabholkar
Working President
Maharashtra Andhashraddha Nirmoolan Samiti

Needless to say, this letter remained unanswered and there was no need for me to go to Aurangabad.

19

The Sainthood of Mother Teresa

Sainthood among Catholics can be bestowed on a person only after it is proved that he or she has performed at least two miracles. After Mother Teresa's demise, Pope John Paul II, sent a team to India to initiate the process of canonisation of Mother Teresa. In this connection, I sent an email and also wrote a letter to the Pope on behalf of ANiS. It read as follows:

> Sir,
> Maharashtra Andhashraddha Nirmoolan Samiti constantly strives to eradicate superstition. Regarding god and religion, the Samiti's stand is identical with that of the Constitution of India. Along with this, we also insist on adopting a scientific approach and engendering an investigative mindset, which as per our Constitution is a basic duty of every Indian citizen. According to the scientific approach, no miracle is possible. Hence we have persistently opposed the perpetrating of miracles in the name of god and religion. We are confident that, due to our efforts in this regard, people will become more perceptive and wiser, and fight against misery, penury and exploitation in society.
>
> Mother Teresa certainly deserves sainthood solely on the basis of her astounding humanitarian work. In Maharashtra, many such men and women have been elevated to sainthood because of their untiring efforts to improve the lot of humanity. But your criterion for sainthood is that the person should have performed at least two authentic miracles during his or her lifetime

> and you have sent an official team to investigate this matter. We do feel that the Mother who spent her whole life in service to humanity should not be required to offer proof of having performed miracles in order to be made a saint. However, if such miracles are being sought out, we will oppose the process as it is erroneous and against the Constitution. We also want to point out here that the Christian Church has already tendered its apology for the punishment meted out to Galileo, 350 years after his death. Therefore, taking note of this progressive stance now adopted by the Church, to hunt for miracles before bestowing sainthood on her, in our opinion, will be an affront to Mother Teresa. We wish to meet you in this regard when you are expected to arrive in India shortly.

It goes without saying that we did not receive a reply. As for meeting with the Pope? Impossible.

20

The Reincarnation of the Maharani of Jhansi

Mrs Sharayu Sahastrabuddhe, a housewife from Sangli, was leading a normal life with her husband and children. But in 1982, there was an upheaval in their life when they began to feel that somebody followed them around the house. One day, they 'sighted' this person. It was none other than Mahalakshmi, the family deity of the erstwhile Jhansi state. Mahalakshmi said to them, 'I have come here to tell you something. Try hard to remember who you were in your earlier birth. You were the queen of Jhansi. You had a very hectic life then and you died early. Because of this misfortune, you could not perform any of the essential customary and traditional rituals. You should perform them now, at least in this birth.'

Soon, Mrs Sahastrabuddhe was able to remember many details of her previous birth. She travelled from Sangli and Konkan to Akluj, and unearthed many idols that had long remained buried in the ground. She performed a nine-day shanti (a ritual to assuage the deities) for these idols. She remembered that the famous wrestler of Sangli, Vishnu Savarde, was in fact, Nanasaheb Peshwa in his earlier birth, while another gentleman named Shivajirao Savarde was Raosaheb Peshwa. She also recognised Tatya Tope, one of the key figures of the 1857 revolt as having reincarnated in the person of a famous advocate from Sangli. This news was published in the daily *Tarun Bharat* on 11 September 1985 in detail. Owing to her new-found fame, the Jyotish Mandal of Satara organised a lecture by her. One Mr Godbole attended her lecture. She immediately recognised him as a sardar (chieftain) in her army of that time.

A public talk was then arranged for Mrs Sahastrabuddhe as the reincarnation of Rani Lakshmibai of Jhansi to narrate her

experiences. The talk, to be held in the city library of Satara on 21 August 1986, was publicised heavily. It became a topic of hot discussion. It was raised in the weekly meeting of the ANiS. In the meeting we decided to print a pamphlet and distribute it to the audience before the talk; listen to her talk quietly and then participate in the question–answer session if necessary.

The talk was to begin at 6.30 p.m. Usually, people stroll in at 7 p.m. for these talks; but not so this time. By 6 p.m. the hall was utterly-packed. Women had come in large numbers. The whole crowd was eagerly awaiting the arrival of the Rani of Jhansi.

In such an atmosphere, our activists distributed the following pamphlet to the audience and organisers:

Reincarnation of the Rani of Jhansi: Mental Breakdown of Self and Mental Conflict in Others

Mrs Sharayu Sahastrabuddhe of Sangli claims to be the reincarnation of Rani Lakshmibai and to have remembered the memories of this earlier birth of hers. This is an attempt to play with people's sentiments, to encourage superstition and to glorify her own mental illness. The Andhashraddha Nirmoolan Samiti demands that this whole farce be stopped forthwith.

As per our traditional religious philosophy, those who die on the battlefield, are relieved from the cycle of birth–death–rebirth. Given that the Rani of Jhansi was such a remarkably fearless woman, she could not have but attained moksha (final relief from the cycle of birth and death). To trap her back into the cycle of birth and death is clearly mischievous and dabbling with the religious sentiments of people.

Going beyond religious philosophy, if you approach the problem scientifically, it will be clear that being possessed by a deity, baba, peer, or a dead person for sometime on a particular day is a mental illness known as hysteria. But to insist that one is a reincarnation of the dead person is the next step of that illness. This, in medical parlance is known as paranoid schizophrenia. A public exhibition of such mental illness as is being done today is extremely objectionable.

The lunatic brute Raman Raghav, who committed a number of murders, was convinced that he was sent by god to emancipate this world. Outwardly his behaviour was like any sensible person; and not at all like a madman. When he was caught and convicted, he was sentenced to life imprisonment and not death despite several murders, just because he was mentally ill. He is still in jail. This shows the extent to which mental illness can reach.

The notion of rebirth has not been validated by science. All encyclopaedias in the world say the same thing regarding rebirth. Intellect, memory, emotions and awareness exist in the cells of the brain of human beings. When a human being dies, his/her brain too dies, and along with it, his/her intellect and memory are also destroyed. Nothing is left behind. This is an undisputed scientific fact. So, scientifically, the soul and its reincarnation are impossible things.

Claiming to be an incarnation of an eminent historical personality is either a mental illness or a sham. Whatever it may be, it is surely misguiding people and ought to be stopped forthwith. ANiS is determined to awaken people to rebel against such frauds and solicit help from new papers, the government, police and courts of law, whatever is accessible.

Andhashraddha Nirmoolan Samiti
(Committee for the Eradication of Superstition)

After we had distributed the pamphlets, the excitement in the gathering increased. At the stroke of 6 p.m., Mrs Sahastrabuddhe arrived. She too was handed a pamphlet while she was on her way to the dais.

She did not rise to make the speech, preferring instead to sit. Odd behaviour indeed for the reincarnation of the great fighter Rani Lakshmibai to sit and speak, like an elderly person. People expected a spirited and commanding speech from her but were utterly disappointed. Mrs Sahastrabuddhe, still seated, began to speak in a drab, monotonous voice, almost like a schoolgirl

struggling with the long speech she had memorised for a competition.

She narrated the story of how a woman followed her in her house, materialised before her one day and told her that she, Mrs Sahastrabuddhe, was the reincarnation of the Rani of Jhansi. She then spoke about how her memory of the past revived as she read the history of that time; and how when she unearthed idols, she was possessed and could not be restrained by six or more men at a time. After this, she began narrating her personal experiences (of her earlier birth as the Rani) right from the time of her childhood. She said:

'I was just three years old when my mother Bhagirathibai passed away. I remember that I cried a lot and caused a great deal of commotion. While in Brahmavarta I used to play with Raobaji's son Nana and Raosaheb. The Peshawas were cursed not to beget a son to carry on their legacy. Soon I was married to Gangadhar Pant. That he was impotent is a plain slander. He used to act in plays in female roles and wore women's clothes for that reason. The genealogy of our Tambe family was . . . (here she recited the names of men of several generations like the names recited in the daily ablution ritual known as "sandhya"). Damodar was my son. He is reborn in Karnataka. There is going to be a world war at the end of the twentieth century. This war will lead to a Hindu empire all over the world. Nostradamus too has said so. He is a great astrologer. Most of his predictions have been proved to be correct. He has also predicted that this war of religion is going to be led by a great young man from the south and I believe that man must be Damodar.' A little later, the lady remembered her speeches and songs of her earlier birth and time. She then spoke in Hindi.

The audience was clearly disillusioned. They had come with great expectations. Some of them began leaving the hall, but many still remained till the end. The chairman of the function declared a question–answer session as soon as her lecture was over. The questions came at her fast and thick.

'We will get you a horse; will you ride it?'

The reply, 'No.'

'If we give you a sword will you wield it?'

The reply, 'No.'

'As you died on the battlefield while fighting, you have

attained moksha (release from birth and death cycle). Why were you reborn?'

The reply, 'For the sake of doing pious acts.'

'Then go and do some pious acts. Why are you giving speeches?'

'The family of the Rani of Jhansi, the Tambe family, originally came from Dhavadshi, a place near Satara. Isn't it true that you went there and obtained their genealogy from there?'

The reply, 'Yes, I had been to Dhavadshi.'

'How is it that you include some references from the library?'

'How is it that you use English words?'

No response.

'You delivered the speech that you had supposedly made as the Rani of Jhansi. But the Hindi that you used is contemporary. Instead, you should have spoken in the old Madhya Pradesh Hindi of that time. How did this modern Hindi come into your speech?'

No reply.

'Is it true that some time back you were treated for mental illness by a famous neurologist from Satara?'

The reply, 'Yes, it is true.'

For the last few months, the 'Rani of Jhansi' had been delivering speeches, but never had she been bombarded with such a barrage of questions before.

Everywhere else her speech had been welcomed and appreciated and people were happy to have obtained proof of her rebirth. But what took place in Satara was totally unexpected. People doubted her rebirth, and asked clever and scornful questions. The chairman, realising what was in store ahead, hurriedly declared that the meeting was over without making his own speech.

What was this entire story about if there was no rebirth? Was it merely a delusion of some sort? A mental illness? Why does the mind behave in such a way? To explain all these perplexing things to the residents of Satara, ANiS arranged a lecture by the psychiatrist Dr Prasanna Dabholkar. A huge crowd had gathered to listen to him.

Both these programmes were well reported in newspapers from Kolhapur. Mrs Sastrabuddhe was enraged. On 26 September

1986, she published the following letter in the daily, *Kolhapur Sakal* .

Remembrance of my earlier birth as the Rani of Jhansi is a topic for research

On 21 August I delivered a lecture on 'Reincarnation of the Rani of Jhansi' at Satara. This was reported in the daily *Sakal* on 27 August. I used to consider myself as the Rani of Jhansi but my stand regarding that news is as below:

I have not made any statement claiming to be the Rani of Jhansi. All that I intended to tell people was that I remembered all those things of the past. It's up to them to think over and make their own inferences from what I narrated. I firmly believe that ANiS activists created confusion during the question-answer session.

Only some questions were reported out of the many questions asked and answered during the session. All the questions as well as their answers should have been reported. If rebirth is a lie, then isn't equating whatever we remember of the past birth with mental illness, itself a mental illness on the part of ANiS? Branding something as mental illness and then pushing it under the carpet is misleading society. Narendra Dabholkar of ANiS had attended the meeting personally. He refrained from asking a single question and let his cronies create confusion. How can that be considered confusion caused by the audience? All these goings-on should be taken into consideration.

I promptly answered all questions asked of me. Can a mentally ill person answer so promptly? The programme had to be terminated because of the pandemonium created. The oversmart section of the audience did not care that they were depriving others who wanted to listen to me. Students who had attended the meeting were creating trouble and continued asking questions even after the meeting was over.

ANiS in their pamphlet had said that one who dies on the battlefield while fighting attains moksha. Does

this concept fit into their science?

If ANiS accepts this concept then why should they deny the concept of rebirth? This does not fit in with their idea of scientific temper. What is 'buvabaji' and 'dhongbaji' (fraud)? What I do can be called buvabaji only if I intended to make money by cheating people.

The people from Satara have shown to what level they have descended in the name of ANiS. If the chief of ANiS was studious enough, he should have asked me questions based on his deep psychological studies. The display of their own mental ill health made by his supporters was least expected.

Mrs Sharayu Sahastrabuddhe, Sangli
I replied to her letter as below:

Respected Editor,
Dainik Sakal
Kolhapur

I came across the letter 'Remembrance of my earlier birth as the Rani of Jhansi is a topic for research' written by Mrs Sharayu Sahastrabuddhe and published in your paper on 26 September, 1986 only when one of our activists sent it to me, since this daily is not circulated in Satara. She has accused me, the ANiS and the residents of Satara. She says that I did not ask her any question (in her public speech at Satara) but created bedlam through my cronies; the people of Satara, thereby, showed how much they have fallen and put their mental ill health on show. All these allegations are totally erroneous and only an indication of the nervous and frightened state of her mind. I am, therefore, clarifying the whole episode.

In her Satara speech, Mrs Sahastrabuddhe narrated all that she remembered while she was the Rani of Jhansi for nearly an hour. She narrated all the details (of her earlier birth as the Rani) right from her early childhood when she was three years old and her mother's death to even those sensitive ones concerning

her husband's alleged impotency and from the genealogy of the Rani's family to all the battles she waged against the British. All this information was supposedly based on her real life experience of that time and memories of that earlier birth. Her speech was utterly monotonous like a schoolgirl's lengthy speech committed to memory.

The people of Satara had gathered with great expectations and patiently listened to her disappointing speech. This certainly is a sign of their maturity as an audience. After the speech the session was thrown open for questions. The editor of the *Dainik Gramoddhar* , Bapusaheb Jadhav, and editor of *Dainik Maharashtra Mitra* and ex-librarian of the city library, Sanjay Kolhatkar, asked the maximum number of questions and almost all the perplexing ones. Neither of them are members of ANiS.

Many others from the audience, gentlemen and ladies alike, and not necessarily students, also asked questions. The answers given by Mrs Sahastrabuddhe were unsatisfactory and, at times, plain ridiculous. The audience expecting a lot from her were thoroughly disappointed and felt cheated. This did cause a little commotion. They began leaving the hall as it was getting late.

We distributed our pamphlet, 'Reincarnation of the Rani of Jhansi: Mental Breakdown of Self and Mental Conflict in Others' with great confidence in the awakening that has been brought about by ANiS among the people of Satara. One pamphlet was given to Mrs Sahastrabuddhe too. Many points raised in this pamphlet remained unanswered by her both in her speech and during the question-answer session. The important points raised in the pamphlet were:

- As per our traditional religious thought, those who die on the battlefield for the sake of their country are relieved from the birth, death and rebirth cycle. ANiS does not believe in the birth and death cycle and moksha (emancipation of soul). However, most

Indians who believe in these concepts also believe that the Rani of Jhansi must have attained moksha. Despite this general belief, isn't pulling this brave warrior Rani back into the cycle of birth and death a dangerous cruel joke played on gullible people's sentiments?

- A person's intellect, memory, sentiments, awareness and feelings—all of these phenomena are lodged in his brain. That the brain is destroyed on death and along with it are destroyed all these phenomena is an unquestionable scientific truth. The undying soul and its rebirths are, therefore, scientifically impossible phenomena.
- Scientifically speaking, Mrs Sahastrabuddhe's memories of her past birth is a mental illness. She was being treated for a long time by a doctor from Satara. She was advised by this doctor to approach a well-qualified psychiatrist. In her own speech she has mentioned that she was examined by Dr Devasikdar (an eminent psychiatrist from Miraj). She had also mentioned in her own speech, 'For a long time I felt I was constantly followed by a certain form. One day this form materialised in a human body and told me that I was the reincarnation of the Rani of Jhansi and was reborn to complete all her incomplete religious tasks.' All these are symptoms of mental illness.

Every mental disease is not necessarily curable; but maintaining that one is reincarnation of an important historical figure is either a mental illness or plain cheating and is misleading people in either case. Mrs Sahastrabuddhe, as per her claim, may not be getting any monetary benefit out of it. But the danger from buvabaji lies not only in monetary loss to the people but more so in leading people to think in a wrong manner. That is why ANiS strongly opposes it. Just four days after Mrs Sahastrabuddhe's speech, we arranged another lecture on rebirth, possession by demon or deity, and so on. The large audience that had gathered to participate in this scientific discourse

appreciated it enthusiastically. It showed that people do have an interest in understanding the scientific outlook.

The adventures of the reincarnated Rani of Jhansi seem to have ceased since then.

21

A Case of Bhanamati Resolved

Several years ago, Dr Barve, a medical practitioner who had been practising for thirty years in Kadegaon, Khanapur taluk, Sangli district sent me news of a puzzling incident. This was immediately followed by stories in the print media. Dr Barve's message and the media stories both spoke of the unusual phenomenon of stones and pieces of glass coming out of the eyes of some girls from the Zilla Parishad Girls' School at Kadegaon, which had resulted in much anxiety and commotion in the town. This school was being run in the residence of one Gajanan Deshpande. For about three to four days prior to the report, some girls, all of a sudden realised that stones and pieces of glass were oozing from their eyes.

Tanuja Mansing Mane was the first girl to experience this. Later, on the same day, many other girls also complained of stones coming out of their eyes. These stones were uneven and about two to five grams in weight. This took place several times in front of the teachers, the president, parents and citizens. Finally, the townspeople decided to shift the school from its existing premises to another location. The doctors of the Primary Health Care Centre as well as other doctors examined the girls, and were perplexed by this phenomenon. Some parents decided not to send their daughters to the school. A total of twenty-five girls were afflicted. This strange phenomenon that was contrary to the rules of science became the talk of the town.

Soon, we decided to leave for Kadegaon. I, along with psychiatrist Prasanna Dabholkar, Kumar Mandpe, an ANiS office-bearer from Satara, Marutrao Pange and a couple of other enthusiastic youngsters reached Kadegaon at around 10 a.m. We went to Dr Barve's dispensary. He was both concerned and

confused, and had decided to consult us before people from the village started wasting money on mantriks and dev-devaski. He was not sure how we would solve the problem.

Dattatreya Kulkarni, the headmaster of the girls' school, the class teacher Vimalabai Shinde, newsreporter Peerjade and a few others joined us as soon as we reached. We began by collecting detailed information regarding the episode.

The whole thing had started on 17 February at 4.30 p.m. when the class was on. A ten-year-old girl, Tanuja Mansing Mane, complained to her class teacher that something seemed to be hurting her eye. The teacher looked at her eye carefully and detected two small stones behind the lower eyelid; she removed the stones but the girl had the same complaint after about fifteen minutes. There were two more stones. Tanuja also complained that a boy had thrown sand in her face. The teacher informed her guardians and asked them to consult a doctor immediately, which advice they acted on promptly. But the doctor could not observe any problem with her eyes. This occurrence of stones in the eyes increased in the next few days.

Tanuja had lost her father. Her mother lived with her in-laws, and Tanuja and her younger sister were being brought up by their maternal grandfather. In the next few days, the incidents decreased. When her grandfather sent her to visit her mother for a few days, they ceased altogether.

Tanuja returned to her grandfather in the first week of March, and the episodes began all over again. This time, it became an epidemic in the third standard. In a few days, at least two more girls complained every day of having the same problem. Soon, eight more girls were complaining of this affliction. Vaishali Phase, a very intelligent girl from the first standard, who had joined the third standard for a while, also developed this problem. The stones appeared every fifteen to twenty minutes, at times almost every minute. The affliction abated or escalated in some cases. The teacher had actually collected a heap of stones oozing out of her wards' eyes and brought it to show us. This happened not only in school. Parents too had the same experience at home.

Two girls, Dange and Sheikh, left their home to play in a nearby playground. When they returned, their fathers saw the stones in their eyes. The police were witness to this instance, but

ignored it since it did not fall with the ambit of their work. The sarpanch, a member of the zilla parishad and the chairperson of the education committee, all visited the school to find out what was happening. They too witnessed the phenomenon. Convinced about the veracity of the situation, an application for a change of in the school's location was forwarded to the higher authorities. For a while, the classroom of standard third was shifted to the Datta temple on an experimental basis, to no avail. Some people then approached the swami of the town. He promised to break the bhanamati by the next morning. Nothing changed. Talismans were tied round the necks of the girls, but there was no relief from the evil affliction.

MBBS doctors from the town and the Primary Health Care Centre examined the girls and sent a written report stating, 'This seems an instance of black magic which is beyond the reach of medical science.' The district health officer and the civil surgeon of Sangli visited the place. Two hours before their arrival and for about half an hour after, no stones appeared. The doctors examined the girls' eyes, stretching their eyelids and using torchlight. There were no stones. After a while, two girls complained of stones in the eye, pressing their eyes with their hands. There really was a stone in the corner of the eye. Those stones were taken to Sangli for examination. Tanuja Mane's grandfather took her to an eye specialist in Karad. He examined the girl's eyes, took some photographs and packed her off, prescribing some regular eye drops as he could not discover the cause.

Everybody—the headmaster, the class teacher, mediapersons, parents and the townspeople—was convinced that this was an instance of black magic. But since Dr Barve had invited us, they had to bear with us. The interesting part of it all was that the girls who caused all this commotion seemed quite happy. They were neither scared nor worried about what was happening. Some fifteen to twenty small and big stones kept coming out of their eyes every day. The girls had become used to it, and the teacher too continued her teaching without hindrance.

They all believed that there existed some power like bhanamati that disregarded the rules of science. They could not imagine that anything else could do such a thing to so many girls in broad daylight under the nose of the class teacher. Nor was it

probable that ten-year-old innocent girls would play such a trick in their school and homes. Moreover, all of them had seen the stones materialising from nowhere in the girls' eyes. This direct evidence counted a lot more than our logic.

A ten year old does understand that his or her eye is a very delicate organ and should not be trifled with. So, it seemed odd that the girls would do this to themselves. Moreover, many stones had come out of their eyes, but nobody seemed to be suffering too much. It was, therefore, easier and more convenient to attribute this phenomenon, which had started on a new moon day, to sorcery. It made sense of the whole thing. Some girls did say that they had seen a black figure beckoning them. But they had refused to go near it and then this affliction had commenced. Others said that somebody had thrown sand on their eyes, while some kids thought that someone put stones in their eyes while they were asleep. It was generally believed that if the cause was mysterious, so should be its remedy.

Yet, very early on, we had already noticed a few things to support our deduction that the girls were doing this to themselves:

- None of these girls seemed to be anxious that these stones would harm their eyes.
- All these girls were studying in the same class and were quite friendly with each other.
- Five of these girls were dull according to the class teacher. Although they hadn't done very well in their earlier classes, they had been promoted and had somehow reached the third standard. Now they were not able to write even a single sentence correctly.
- This affliction started with just one girl and then kept growing at the rate of two more girls every week.
- The doctors who came from Sangli had not brought any instruments with them and had used only a torch to examine their eyes.
- Most stones collected were of the same kind and of the same size.
- No one suspected the girls. So the discourse mostly consisted of discussion, curiosity, and sympathising with and pampering the girls.

- The girls were right-handed and the stones appeared in the right eye almost all the time.
- Nobody ever questioned whether such a thing was possible, given the structure of the eyeball as described in the medical and physiological sciences.
- The facts had already started swelling with exaggeration and fabrication. Actually, only ten girls had stones coming out of their eyes, but in news reports, the number had been reported as twenty-five. The rumour was that all the girls had not been afflicted on the same day but the number increased gradually; the stones were not irregular but smooth and shapely; they also contained pieces of glass. All of this was untrue. Even as this was happening, the girls attended school regularly.

We requested the headmaster, teacher and others to allow us to talk to the girls. We decided to talk to them in pairs. The girls interviewed were detained in the rear portion of the house and not allowed to mix with the others. Our activists chatted with them to gain more information. They were kept amused for about three to four hours till all the girls had been interviewed. Some useful information emerged from these chats. Prasanna interviewed five girls and I interviewed four. Both of us talked to the girls from the first standard. All the girls were between nine and ten years old; they looked so innocent that we couldn't help but feel guilty about suspecting them. We talked to them very cordially and cheerfully, spending about half an hour with every girl. The first girl I interviewed was Savitra Bhanudas Mali. She proved a tough nut to crack. She consistently reiterated that she did not know where the stones came from. Finally, she promised me that no more stones would 'appear'.

The other girls gave in and revealed everything. The most important story was the one that Tanuja Mansing Mane told us. For the first ten minutes or so she parried, but soon she was unable to hold back and told us everything even as she sobbed the whole time. Tanuja was younger than the other girls and small of stature. Her father had been an alcoholic and had died of his addiction. She lived away from her mother, in her grandfather's house. At this tender age, she was considered old enough to do household work. There was no relief from these

grinding chores, and she was even beaten at times.

Tanuja was not an exception. Household chores and the occasional beating was the lot of almost all the girls. The elders did not find anything wrong or improper in this treatment being meted out to a female child. But Tanuja was certainly disappointed and depressed. Once, while she was playing, a boy had thrown sand on her. After a while she felt something hurting her eye. She pressed the corner of her eye and a small stone fell out. She replaced that stone in the eye and the stone caused no pain. She repeated this once again while in school, and later, she did it several times a day. The rumour that this was bhanamati spread like wildfire. Tanuja got some respite from her drudgery. The beatings stopped. She was now treated with a little affection. Despite the fact that examinations were fast approaching, she was sent to her mother's house. The bhanamati then ceased altogether. But Tanuja summoned her beloved bhanamati when she was sent back to Kadegaon. She also told us that she had picked up the stones from the heap of rubbish collected when the school was swept, and revealed that she had put three stones in her eyes before coming to school. These stones, the size of a rice grain, she took out from under the lower eyelid.

At the end of her narration she began weeping copiously. She felt uneasy and rested on the nearby cot for about fifteen minutes. Recognising that the bhanamati was a very useful tool to attract attention and sympathy and be in the limelight, soon some other girls adopted it. These girls told us who had taught them this trick and whom they had passed it on to. Being convinced that it does no harm to the eye, they enthusiastically repeated it fifteen to twenty times a day.

Even as the teacher carried on with her teaching, the girls shouted, 'a stone has come out' and took it out for everyone to see. This occurred every five minutes. The act consisted of many tricks. Most of the stones appeared stuck to the lower eyelid; some girls inserted the stones and took it out almost simultaneously; some positioned the stone through the corner of the eye under the upper eyelid; many times they just pretended to rub their eyes and displayed the stone that was already with them and was somewhat bigger than the normal ones. The girls were aware that this was a unique trick and they had to guard their secret well. This was the sum total of the story that the girls

told us in their own words. The teacher did not suspect the girls; others stayed away, possibly due to their irrational fear of bhanamati; nobody had tried to examine it critically.

After having told us their stories, Tanuja Mane and the other girls demonstrated how they did the trick. Saida Sheikh fixed a stone under the upper eyelid with great finesse. Dr Barve did not notice it even after stretching her eyelids both ways and under torchlight. After ten minutes, she rubbed her eyes and took the stone out. We called headmaster Kulkarni into the room and told the girls to apologise. They promised that there would be no more episodes of stones in the eyes and asked for his pardon. This entire episode was put on paper with the girls' signatures on it and was handed over to us. Tanuja added that if she was not made to clean vessels, wash clothes and beaten on top of it, she would stop putting stones in her eyes.

In the afternoon, we fixed a meeting of parents, teachers and other notables in the village council. The ophthalmologist, Professor Ayachit, and his team, who had been sent by the civil surgeon of Sangli, had already arrived there and begun examining the girls and taking photographs of their eyes. We met them and told them about our findings, but they didn't seem interested. All they wanted to do was to submit a report in accordance with their routine.

While we were still discussing the possibility of presenting the report together with the team, a crowd pushed the door open and came in with Saida Sheikh shouting, 'See, this girl has started getting stones in her eyes right now!' She removed her hand from her eye and showed everyone the stone. Saida was a little ashamed when she noticed me. In the same room, Savitra Mali and Tanuja Mane sat waiting to be examined. I sent the entire crowd who had come in with Saida out. Only Saida stayed back.

Then I patted Tanuja on the back and said to her, 'You are a good girl, aren't you? Now take this stone and show us how you put it in the eye like you showed us before.' She took the stone and pulling her eyelid down, quickly put it in. Saida too did the same. The team from Sangli observed everything. Then all of us went to the council hall where the meeting had turned into a huge village gathering. Plenty of villagers, teachers and women had gathered. High-school students had to stand in the veranda.

The hall was in great tumult. Some had heard partial accounts of what had happened. This had strained their curiosity and caused a lot of unrest. They accused ANiS of lying. Some had real doubts and were seeking answers. Dr Barve opened the meeting by saying, 'The doctors from Sangli have examined the girls, and the team from Satara have cross-examined them. Let us hear them. If you are convinced, it will save the girls' parents the expenses they will incur on account of mantrik charges and also anxiety. My sole aim in taking all this trouble was to save you all from expense and anxiety. We have got to put an end to this for everyone's peace of mind.'

I spoke next, and explained the reality of what is known as bhanamati, and what actually happens in such cases. In this case, I said, we had discovered what was happening and why, and we had also been promised by those who indulged in it that they would stop it forthwith. I added that the reasons why each person took recourse to this trick would not be revealed, because we do not want to expose these young girls in front of the whole village. However, if any parent was anxious to know about his own daughter, they were welcome to Satara with their daughter. We would answer all their queries there.

We then clarified some doubts. How is it that a thing like a stone does not cause any trouble even when it is in the eye? The inner lining of the eye secrets a fluid that coats the stone and this coating acts like grease. Such a stone could remain in the eye for a couple of months without causing any trouble whatsoever, especially if it is put there deliberately. One finds that a number of women put small red berry seeds into their eyes while playing as children. This stone (or seed) sometimes comes out on its own or can be taken out by pressing the eyelid or the muscle by its side. There is no pain or injury while the stone is being removed except that the edge of the lid becomes slightly red. The stones are not detected even in torchlight and stretching both the eyelids upward and downward as had been demonstrated by Dr Barve. So both the doubts regarding the stones not being detected and causing no injury to the eye were scientifically clarified.

We then clarified that it was wrong to think that it must be bhanamati because such young girls cannot and will not play such a trick. Such stones cannot materialise in the eyes according

to science. The only possibility that remains is that the stones were inserted in the eyes either by the girls themselves or by someone else. Being thus fooled by your own wards does seem painful, but the truth that has emerged has to be accepted. It is not a lie, for the girls have given it to us in writing. As to whether it might happen again, only a psychiatrist would be able to comment.

Then Dr Prasanna Dabholkar, the psychiatrist, explained the psychological aspect of the whole affair. He said, 'A few girls may repeat this occasionally. Some girls may suffer from locked jaws or faint or show some other symptoms. But you need not worry about that. Also refrain from discussing it or showing anxiety about it. Do not scold the girls for such behaviour, and do not ask them about the incident again and again, trying to dig out the truth. Just leave them alone. This will certainly stop soon and, in case you feel it necessary, you are welcome to our clinic at Satara, where we will get rid of the remaining bhanamati.'

We had a chat with Tanuja's grandfather afterwards. He was an ex-headmaster of a school. A sensitive and perceptive man, he had suffered tremendously in this episode. He sensed the truth of Tanuja's plight and assured us that he would remedy the situation.

The headmaster of the school was worried that, since he had already applied for a change in the location of the school, he would lose the present ideal location, and wanted us to recommend that the school should carry on in the present premises. This we gladly did.

22

Fatalism Set on Fire

In 1995, an all-India seminar on astrology was organised at Satara. It was very well attended. Only recently, an announcement that a university of astrology would be established had been made. Taking advantage of this occasion, ANiS prepared a list of twenty-one questions on why astrology cannot be called a science, and distributed copies of it to all concerned. None of the astrologers or their institutions replied.

But these questions are not what made the conference famous; it was the novel protest that ANiS organised, called 'burning the fetish of fatalism'. This programme consisted of hundreds of individuals burning their own horoscope, which we believe to be a symbol of fatalism. In addition, to impress upon the minds of people that there was no such thing as an auspicious or inauspicious time, a list of all auspicious times according to the Hindu Panchanga (religious almanac) would also be burnt along with the horoscopes.

We began receiving intimidation and threats as soon as we announced our programme. The president of the seminar, Dr Waikar, argued that those who want to join this horoscope-burning programme ought to also smear out the tilaks on their wives' foreheads and break their mangalsutras (both 'auspicious' signs of a woman's husband being alive). The Marathi daily *Maharashtra Times* published an editorial calling our action 'idle meddling into "kumkum"'. In the seminar itself, instead of refuting ANiS's arguments logically, an it was stressed that astrology is a part of the Hindu religion. The organisation Hindu Ekajut (Hindu Unity) went a step further and declared that, because the Panchanga and the horoscope were a part of the Hindu religion, burning them was an assault on Hinduism. They

also avowed that they would teach a fitting lesson to 'horoscope burners'. The Hindu Ekajut consisted of the Shiv Sena, Vishwa Hindu Parishad, Bajrang Dal, Hindu Ekta Andolan, among others.

ANiS's stand on burning horoscopes and the list of auspicious days was clear. The horoscope of a child is made immediately after its birth. There are many unscientific aspects involved in it, but for the time being we will keep those aside. Astrologers claim that with the help of the horoscope they can predict details regarding the main events and occurrences in the life of an individual, like education, earnings, marriage, children, accidents, travel to foreign countries and fortune. This means that with the birth of an individual the whole track of his life is fully laid down, which we call destiny, fate, luck, prarabdha, sanchit, etc. Astrologers firmly believe that the movements of the planets give indications about what is going to happen in the life of an individual.

All this boils down to the conclusion that, as soon as you are born, your whole life is preordained. It is inescapable and unalterable. The astrologers cannot change it, but they can predict it. The inevitable death of a dear one cannot be avoided, but one can at least be by their side when they are about to die. But even this piece of good luck has to be earned by giving money and gifts to brahmins or by using precious stones recommended by them. A purohit has to be appeased to curry this favour.

The idea of a preordained life, in one stroke, makes man helplessly dependent. Needless to say, it is unscientific. A man's life is determined by his own ability and endeavour and his social environment. The movements of the planets have nothing to do with it. The atom bomb dropped on Hiroshima killed hundreds of thousands of people in one moment. They were surely not all destined to die at that very moment according to their horoscopes. The social situation caused by the war thrust this fate upon them. About a hundred years ago, no horoscope of any Indian woman showed any prospect of education. But then came the social reformers, society became dynamic and women began to be educated. Their horoscopes could not hold them back from education. This proves that man's future is not ordained by stars and planets or the rectangles of his horoscope. It depends on how he uses his mind, and the skill and power of

his hands. That is why horoscopes—the symbols of the astrologers' attempts to fetter man—should be burnt.

ANiS declared the date of our 'burning fatalism' programme. Two days before that date, I was called to the police station. The inspector told me to cancel the programme or at least not burn the horoscopes and the Hindu calendar. When we asked him for the reason, we were told that both the Panchanga and the kundali (horoscope) are part of the Hindu religion and that our programme could hurt the religious sentiments of Hindus, and this could create unrest. I was accompanied by advocate Sanjay Deshmukh, the organiser of our programme. We stated our stand: 'Panchang, that is, the Hindu almanac, is a book of public belief. We have no intention, therefore, to burn it as our work culture has never been that of hurting people's sentiments. All that we are going to do is to make a list of all auspicious timings on a separate paper and then burn it. Similarly, a horoscope is a record of the state of planets at the time of the birth of an individual. It is completely private and has nothing that can be called sacred or religious in it. We are, therefore determined to burn these.' At 10 p.m. the same night, a notice prohibiting the conduct of such a programme publicly in an open ground was served on me. We were bluntly refused police protection for the programme.

We had chosen an open ground for our programme, but it belonged to a private organisation and was closed on all sides. Since we were not going to burn the almanac, the police's notice on that matter was irrelevant. But burning the horoscope would create tension. This matter was discussed with senior police officers who insisted that, since horoscopes were made only by Hindus, burning them was bound to provoke their sentiments. We were verbally warned not to burn them. Earlier, we had been intimidated and asked to bear in mind 'who wields the power'. Someone requested the district chief of police to arrest me for provoking religious sentiments. The atmosphere was very tense. Yet, we saw no reason to change our plan. So, I told them that, even if we were refused permission to carry out our programme, Professor N.D. Patil, the president of ANiS, and I in my capacity as the working president, would burn our own horoscopes as a non-violent enforcement of truth (satyagraha), and cheerfully accept any punishment that was meted out to us. I am not sure

what caused the change in their attitude, but by noon we had received official permission for our programme.

Our programme was fixed for 6.30 p.m. An hour earlier, at 5 p.m., Hindu Ekajut set out on a morcha that had already been advertised in the newspapers. Posters asking people to join the procession in order to teach us a lesson were put up all over the city. The ongoing astrology seminar also made the atmosphere favourable to our adversaries. The morcha had been jointly organised by four to five organisations. Yet, only forty-six individuals took part in it. Then, a donkey was called in to give an edge to the morcha. On the back of this donkey, in addition to my name, Kumar Mandpe and Sanjay Deshmukh's names were also written. Clearly, people choose symbols that suited their understanding, culture and the level of their civility! The procession reached Gandhi Maidan where immoderately bellicose and whining speeches were made. Even this public meeting was only attended by sixty-five people in all.

Public invitation

On the morning of our programme, we had distributed handbills inviting the public to attend the bonfire of fatalism. Many progressive reformist organisations had joined us, and the handbills had been made in the names of all these organisations. It said:

Citizens of Satara—come one, come all and participate in the bonfire of fatalism!

> The all-India Seminar on Astrology is being held from 3 November 1995 to 5 November 1995 in Satara. Such seminars have been held in Maharashtra several times before. In all such conferences, radical progressive organisations have asked astrologers some pertinent questions which they have never cared to reply to satisfactorily. We had sent a list of such questions to the working president and the president of the current seminar, as well as the president of the Maharashtra Jyotish Mahamandal (Astrological Society) before the seminar commenced. This time too we did not receive

any satisfactory answers to our questions. This bill puts the facts of the matter before the citizens of Satara.

The revolutions of stars and planets are predicted by astronomers and mathematicians; they do not possess any power whatsoever to cause good or bad, auspicious or inauspicious effects on any individual's life. Astrology that claims an antiquity of two thousand years has not yet produced any evidence regarding its powers. As opposed to this, our Constitution expects us to adopt a scientific approach as our duty as a citizen of India. With this in mind, we request everyone to treat astrology as a means of entertainment and not give it any credence more than that.

The astrologers tell us that their science indicates what is in store for an individual during his life, meaning that an individual is totally dependent on his preordained fate. We, on the contrary, are convinced that an individual's life is the result of his own efforts and the social conditions in which he lives and has nothing whatsoever to do with his fate and the nine planets of the astrologers. We, therefore, call upon all of you to turn your back on astrology that inculcates fatalism in the social psyche.

Horoscopes are made in the infancy of individuals and give them the crutches of fatalism for support. To help people get rid of these crutches, we are organising a public bonfire of horoscopes on 4 November 1995 at 6.30 p.m. Similarly, to remove imaginary, irrational ideas regarding auspicious and inauspicious times, and to convince people that any time is good for good, honest work. We are also going to burn those pages of the Panchang that give a list of auspicious and inauspicious times.

Everyone is cordially invited to join this bonfire for promoting trust in the 'free agency of man' and his efforts, for dumping fatalism and becoming fearless and thus carrying forward the torch lit by our late social reformers.

The programme was a great success. All told, there were 150

men, women and children present. Representatives of many progressive organisations who attended the meeting reiterated their support to our stand. Kumar Mandpe read the resolution which was repeated by the audience after him. All of them burned their horoscopes. The president of ANiS, Professor N.D. Patil, and the renowned scholar Dr A.H. Salunkhye spoke. Dr Salunkhye said, 'Chanakya had rejected fatalism and astrology 2,300 years ago. Even astrologers themselves do not necessarily believe in it. Their objective is to ensnare gullible, innocent people and exploit them to fatten their own wallets. The latest endeavour to promote astrology as a science is nothing but an attempt to preserve this age-old tradition of exploitation and the fatalist psyche that has destroyed a hundred generations of Indians. On the other hand, the "bonfire of fatalism" is an attempt to liberate people's minds from the shackles of fatalism.'

Professor N.D. Patil also stressed the selfish objective behind the fad of astrology and added, 'The leading light of the present astrology seminar at Satara, Shri Jayant Salgaonkar, started a new daily called *Kalanirnay Vartaman* last year. While starting such a daily newspaper, he must have expected it to run at least for a few years. According to his own conviction he also must have created the paper's horoscope to find out its life expectancy. But for some reason or the other, the daily ceased to exist a couple of months of its commencement! Can there be a better proof of the hollowness of astrology?'

Before igniting the bonfire, the following resolution was adopted:

> I am fully confident that the positions of the planets at the time of my birth have no effect on my life whatsoever. So the horoscope showing the planets' positions is humbug and is a fetter of fatalism put on my feet at birth, when I was helpless and ignorant. So, in my opinion, it ought to be burnt publicly as it means burning the psyche of fatalism and mental slavery.
>
> I am proud that the stance of the ANiS is the same as that adopted by Mahatma Phule, Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar, Veer Savarkar, Swami Vivekananda, Mahatma Gandhi and Vinoba Bhave.
>
> Because of my firm stand that the positions of the

planets cannot affect human life, the concept of auspicious time makes no sense to me. I believe that with good intention any work can be commenced at any time and the information regarding auspicious and inauspicious times is not only deceptive but can even mislead the individual and society. The list of shubh muhurt as mentioned in the Panchang has been written on a separate sheet, which too is being burned by ANiS.

I am proud of the satyashodhaki tradition of Maharashtra and act accordingly. As per the Constitution of India, every citizen is duty-bound to adopt a scientific outlook; through this programme of the bonfire of fatalism, I am discharging my duty in deed.

The programme was well-liked by many progressive organisations. ANiS then declared that it would be repeated all over Maharashtra. The Hindu Ekajut retaliated with the announcement that it would fight ANiS everywhere as it did in Satara. It is not possible for such organisations to fight at the rational, intellectual level, so it is quite natural for them to provoke religious sentiments to enlist peoples' support. Movements of social reform have to face such opposition every now and then. ANiS, too, accepts this challenge with determination.

23

Open Letter to Vice Chancellors of Universities in Maharashtra on the Introduction of Astrology as a Subject of Study

Respected Vice Chancellor,
Universities in Maharashtra
Sir,
A retrograde step to push back the scientific outlook that is most fundamental to the field of education is being taken. We request you to declare your firm stand regarding this decision. Hence this letter.

You must have, by now, received the decision of the University Grants Commission (UGC) to set up a department of vedic astrology as Astrological Science in Indian universities. The UGC Chairman, Hari Gautam, in an interview has said that seventy to eighty universities have so far shown interest in setting up such departments. We would like to request you to ask for UGC's letter in this connection from your Registrar and read it carefully, in case it has slipped your attention. The letter extols the benefits of this course of study. It claims that, along with the students who opt for this course, other professionals like physicians, architects, experts in finance and marketing, will also benefit from it. Provision for diploma, BSc and MSc degree courses will be made in this new proposed department of Astrological Science. We entreat you; do go through this letter that so strongly recommends introduction of this new 'science'. It states that vedic phalajyotish is the most cherished branch of our

traditional classical knowledge. Prescience of the individual and universal happenings hidden in the future is made possible by this science, thereby helping us do away with stress, anxiety and uncertainty regarding the future by planning it well in advance. The study of this science will afford a new dimension to the disciplines of vedic mathematics, vastushastra, agriculture and space science. This is not all; the university departments of this important science will spread our influence over the whole world of knowledge!

Sir, please arrange to send the precious books in this connection, written by Lokahitawadi Gopal Hari Deshmukh, Jyotirao Phule, Agarkar, Dr Ambedkar and Savarkar to those UGC members who do not tire of extolling vedic astrology. It will be sufficient if the thoughts expressed by these social reformers of the last century somehow enter the brains of the concerned members. If they are too busy to find time to read these books, let them at least read what Jyotiba Phule, the 'Pre-eminent Chancellor of the Rationalist University of Maharashtra', has said in this connection. What we state today in order to expose the sham of astrology and which stumps the whole lot of astrologers, has its roots in the thoughts of Jyotiba Phule expressed in somewhat crude and impolite language. But it is enough to enlighten the wits of the UGC members. (Of course, only if their horoscopes provide for such happenstance!)

Sir, the Maharashtra state, and especially the field of education, are both the legacy of our great social reformers and rationalist tradition of which you are also a representative. It's a pity that we are compelled to write this letter to you. Here it is pertinent to mention that when Sathya Sai Baba was growing stronger by the day with his so-called miracles, the Vice Chancellor of Bangalore University, Dr H. Narasimhaiah, instituted a committee of scientists to challenge him. Sathya Sai Baba raised a hue and cry against it but in the end ran away from any scientific investigation.

We had expected such a firm stand against the

decision of introducing astrology in the universities. There is, however, some cause for satisfaction. The Vice Chancellor of Bombay University, Bhalchandra Mungekar, took a firm stand. The senior astronomer Dr Jayant Narlikar gave vent to his thoughts against the decision. Professor Yashpal, the ex-Chairman of UGC and a renowned astronomer, has also written a lot about this decision which, we suggest, will help you enlighten your outlook. Professor Yashpal says, 'The regular and orderly movements of the planets as compared with the utter uncertainty of human life induced primitive man to think that the planets might be controlling human life. In the early days, astrology, mathematics and astronomy were not separate branches of knowledge. Later as science developed, mathematics and astronomy grew as separate sciences. Astrology, however, always remained ambiguous and failed to develop as a precise and systematic body of knowledge. There is no harm if one wants to study the long journey of astrology in the light of its effects on human history as an anthropological exercise. No one objects to the historical study of all sorts of black magic that have been observed in primitive cultures all over the world; however, will it not be ridiculous if our defence ministry thinks about using the classical technology of the ancient tradition—"muth marane"—a black magic ploy to kill the enemy, and introduces it in their training programmes? Equally ridiculous is the idea of asking doctors, architects, stock market, or industries to seek help from astrologers. Should twenty-first century India depend on so-called vedic astrology to facilitate diagnosis of diseases, assessment of how strong and stout a structure is, perfect understanding of future ups and downs of the share market and planning war strategies?'

Sir, inculcating a scientific outlook is obligatory to every Indian citizen as per our Constitution and is a core component of education. That vedic astrology is totally baseless has to be told to the students and the society. If you and your professors refuse to accept this

responsibility, who is going to do this job?

Sir, you must be aware of the scientific method of testing a hypothesis. Science acknowledges a hypothesis but it is tested in a specific way, with rigid scrutiny, at various places and various levels by many scientists. If the hypothesis stands all this rigid scrutiny and passes all the tests then it is accepted as a theory. Astrology cannot stand even the preliminary stage of testing. It has so far not been able to propose any theory that is proven beyond doubt. The hypothesis of astrology tells us that a horoscope is a time-space map of that portion of the sky that is seen from the place of birth and at the time of birth of an individual and that affects the life of the individual. The effect of this space-time map is lifelong and uninterrupted. Scientifically, this entire premise is confusing and lacking evidence of any kind. There is no logic in deciding on the exact time of birth. The solar system has a few dozen satellites and quite a few of them are much larger than our moon. But none of them except the moon finds a place in the horoscope. Rahu and Ketu are actually imaginary points in space, and yet they become planets in our horoscopes. What tests do these astrologers use to decide that the planet Mars is of a masculine nature, Venus is feminine and Saturn of a neuter gender? These days, astrologers have begun using scientific terms like electromagnetic waves, gravity, electromagnetic attraction and such other terms in an attempt to make their discipline look like science. Any lecturer of physics will be able to expose the penury of logic in this attempt, and we appeal to you through this letter that all the universities do so. The horoscope is divided into twelve portions, that is, places. A planet is supposed to cause different effects in these different places. It means that the rays coming from a planet are split into twelve parts to cause a different effect in each place of the horoscope. Now, these things cannot occur unless someone does it intentionally. But to believe that it occurs, we have to presume that the planets possess both intelligence and the ability to think. No intellectual can believe this; and

those who are expected to sharpen the intellects of others at a higher level of the university should not teach such a subject.

Sir, the parties that are so vehemently advocating the introduction of jyotishvigyan into the curriculum may argue that, if there is opposition to the introduction of it as a science, then let it be introduced as a subject in the humanities department. However, we earnestly request you to refuse even this backdoor entry. Sir, the objective of education is to enrich human intellect and human culture. The principle of causality is the crux of the scientific outlook—the most essential tool for sharpening the intellect. The so-called jyotishvigyan that is miles away from such an outlook can never sharpen or enrich anybody's intellect. Moreover, if culture means blossoming of humanity, then astrology can prove to be its killer. Even if we accept that social sciences may not be science in the real sense, all these branches of knowledge, including literature, have proved their potential to enrich human life in various ways. But vedic astrology will have an adverse effect. Astrology is supposed to estimate the most important dimension—time. This means it can tell us what is in store for us in future. But the corollary of this is that we are totally helpless; nothing more than puppets. The events that will happen after five or fifty years have already been determined by the places in our zodiac and the effects of planets, right at the time we were born. If events are predetermined then astrology is of no use and if they are not, where is the need for astrology? If such is the case, why this insistence on teaching astrology, and that too at the university level? What it does, in fact, is to lure people into appeasing the planets that determine their future through religious rites like grahashanti (a ritual aimed at reducing or eliminating the negative effects of the planets that are not in our favour as per our horoscopes), japajapya (recitation of prayer and counting the rosary), and hom-havan (fire sacrifice), so that the money spent on these rites may fatten the

priestly class. This fear of the future and ignorance is certainly destructive of culture.

Some say that astrology is like a board on the highway warning the motorist of an Accident Zone. The road remains the same. Similarly, horoscopes warn a person of the possibilities in his life; it does not change the course of his life. This dangerous thought strikes at the very roots of social change. A pivot of the development of human culture is the fact that man with his intelligence can understand society and the dealings and transactions taking place in it; and that he can also modify, to a certain extent, nature and the existing societal structure to suit his needs. But recognising astrology erodes confidence in man's ability to bring about any change.

Sir, enhancement of backward people in society has been a progressive and persistent tradition in the spread of education in Maharashtra. Introduction of jyotishvigyan in universities is in direct conflict with this tradition of which we are sure, you too are aware. The brahminical higher classes cherish astrology as something sacrosanct in their tradition and, most unfortunately, the lower classes, too, now increasingly follow the system of horoscopes and auspicious times. To stall this regression, educational institutions are expected to emphasise progress since young minds take shape there.

The great reformist Agarkar had said, 'As long as wise men do not show the courage to remove misconceptions harboured by the common people, stubborn opposition (to progress) and undesirable traditions will continue. Europe too would have been in the dark ages even today had Copernicus and Galileo failed to show courage. Mere increase in knowledge is of no use unless one has the courage to adopt a progressive approach.' We are reminded of this at every step, but it becomes all the more pertinent when rationalists do not oppose vehemently enough the proposed introduction of vedic astrology departments in Indian universities. Being the Vice Chancellor of the

University, you are the leading light of rationalism in Maharashtra. Innumerable people in our society who, like me, are struggling for progress urge you to perform this role of a rationalist leader earnestly and perceptibly. Hope this letter will convey our anguish and agony to you.

In case I have written something that might annoy you, I implore you to magnanimously forgive me.

Sincerely,
Narendra Dabholkar
April 2001

24

Vastushastra: ANiS's Stand

The field of vastushastra has become not just a nuisance, but an actual danger in the field of building and construction. People make changes in construction contrary to good building practice just to satisfy the demands of this unscientific and whimsical premise. Politicians have their offices remodelled at great public expense.

ANiS organised a seminar in Pune in 1996 to publicise our stand regarding vastushastra, which in our opinion is a fake science. The declaration made at the seminar read as follows:

'In creating a method of acquiring significant knowledge, "Scientific Outlook" has played a very important role in the history of human progress. The Constitution of our country stipulates the duties of an Indian citizen, the most important duty being adopting a scientific outlook and an attitude of quest. Inculcating scientific attitude is well-emphasised in the new policy on education also.

'The scientific method—observation, reasoning, inference and experimentation and objective examination of causality of a phenomenon—is the main characteristic of the scientific outlook. A majority of people, however, believe that some power unknown and unknowable to the human intellect controls an individual's life. This belief engenders the mindset that a human being's good lies in surrendering to this power, worshipping it and appeasing it to obtain its blessings; man enjoys all the gifts that science has been showering on him all this time and yet refuses to adopt a scientific way of thinking.

'Vastushastra, something that we at ANiS term "the illusory architecture", is the best example of this inconsistent approach. The discipline taught in architectural colleges is based on

modern science, while the so-called vastushastra, which supposedly indicates what is auspicious/inauspicious and what is beneficial/harmful, is based on divine or revealed knowledge and illusory concepts. Vastushastra presents many unscientific concepts using scientific parlance, which is a way of deceiving people. The concept of the structure being beneficial to the owner or the occupant establishes a direct connection between of the structure and the individual's prarabdha and niyati (destiny). Not only are these concepts unscientific, but they are also pernicious to the society and the country. The real problem facing crores of people in this country is how to build reasonably comfortable homes using building material that is available in their surroundings. We, therefore, by this declaration, invite all to depend on scientific outlook and our own efforts, instead of trying to solve real-life problems with the help of these illusory concepts.'

After reading the declaration, Dr Jayant Narlikar first put his signature on it and then released it for distribution.

Challenge given by Datta Naravne

Datta Naravne from Pune is a self-styled expert of vastushilp. During the seminar, he attempted to address the public. When he was refused this opportunity, he distributed pamphlets to the audience that read as below:

> S.N.D.T. unused office premises, Karve Road, Pune
> Building / Bhookhand / construction / observation / inspection/ report / work No. 2290 / 6 July 1996,
> Karve Road, Pune.
>
> This piece of land that is southeast, vyaghramukhi (with a face like a tiger) and a directionless bhookhand (a piece of land) is harmful and dangerous for any kind of use or dwelling. Construction of a building on such land is beset with many difficulties. Even if the building comes up somehow, it cannot be used as it faces the southeast direction. Similarly, the structure and the piece of land on which it stands have both become unstable because the magnetic flow passes through the

diagonal of both the building and the land. The land is triangular and has only five directions— south, southeast, east, northeast, and north—and lacks the west, southwest and northwest directions. This makes the piece of land directionless. Any piece of land must have the four main and four sub-directions. Similarly, to make the structure stable, it is necessary that the magnetic flow runs parallel to the piece of land. The said building is built almost in the brahmasthan, and more open space has been left in its south. Similarly, the building is southeast facing and its main entrance is also in the southeast. Also, the directions southeast and the northeast of this building are long. The breadth of the northeast and southwest is less. The portion in the south is long and the corner in the west is cut out. That is why this building is abandoned and has remained unoccupied for the last twenty-five years. All the money spent on this building has been wasted. In my opinion this has happened because of vastudosh. There are many such buildings around that remain unoccupied.

ANiS activists are challenged to live on this piece of land and the building. They should live here with their families, since the faulty abode adversely affects family and monetary, mental, physical and social conditions of the dweller. To prove this, it is necessary to stay in this building without making any changes in the structure for at least six months. Before accepting this open challenge, it is necessary to sign a written bond made in the presence of five witnesses.

The conditions for occupying this building:

- The occupant should stay there with his family.
- We will decide where the kitchen, bedroom and bathroom should be situated. The bed will be placed as per our stipulations. We will decide in what direction the cooking gas is to be placed. This will be arranged before occupation.

You are invited to stay in this building for six months and experience for yourself what happens in such places

before criticising Vastushastra. There is no sense in making a hue and cry against Vastushastra or defaming it for no rhyme or reason.
This is what I want to submit to them.

Yours,
Datta Naravne

ANiS routinely accepts all such challenges on the spot as it convinces people about how firm we are about our ideology. I, therefore, immediately declared:

1. ANiS activists are prepared to occupy that building permanently if the concerned administration permits.
2. ANiS is prepared to open its offices wherever such buildings, unoccupied because they are inauspicious, are available anywhere in Maharashtra.
3. Going a step further, we invite the experts of this illusory vastushastra to construct buildings that are inauspicious in all aspects and many ANiS activists will live there with their families.

Our declaration was roundly applauded.

The seminar on 'The Declaration on Illusory Vastushastra' had made it a topic of common discourse everywhere in Maharashtra, and was well publicised both by English as well as Marathi newspapers. It was of interest not only to the middle class but also the builders. As for builders and architects, they were clearly split into two lobbies on this topic. Some firmly believed in this illusory shastra and advocated it with great enthusiasm, while there was another lobby builders that did not support it, but were prepared to accommodate structural changes if their customers wanted them. Their business was to build and make profits and not to teach scientific outlook to their customers. There was and still is yet another lobby of builders and architects who were not prepared to accept this sham invading their business, and at least some of them were prepared to oppose it openly. They found the ANiS movement both useful and necessary. Builders' associations all over Maharashtra invited me to talk on this topic. The attendance at these meetings was

very large and the audience too was different from the ones that I usually speak to.

The first meeting took place in Pune. It was an open debate between me and Shrihari Limaye, the author of the famous book *Vastuprakash* . Shrihari is an engineer. According to a submission in his own book, he had not been professionally successful, and his financial condition was precarious. At this juncture he came across the 'science' of vastushastra. He studied it, and wrote and published the book *Vastuprakash* to enlighten the modern world about this ancient knowledge. In Maharashtra, it is considered creditable if 3,000 copies of the first edition of a book are sold in two years. But the first edition of *Vastuprakash* was sold out just in two months and twelve more editions had to be printed in the next two years. (This throws light on the mindset of the educated middle class of Maharashtra. I have met umpteen men from elite society, who complained that their wives changed the interiors of their newly built houses after reading this book.)

At the seminar, Shri Limaye was to speak for about forty-five minutes before I did. Anand Agashe, editor of the Pune edition of the *Times of India* , was to preside. We were allowed to speak again if necessary. It was raining heavily outside, but the hall was packed and people were standing in the veranda holding their umbrellas. Mr Limaye's speech took about an hour. When I got up to speak, the power went off. The proceedings were held up for a while. Inside the packed hall, it was very stuffy; there was no sign of power being restored. But the audience showed no signs of leaving. As a last resort, it was decided that the audience would observe pin-drop silence and I would speak as loudly as possible. I spoke for about three-quarters of an hour; it was followed by a question-and-answer session. Till the end there was no power, and not a soul left his place.

I have delivered similar lectures on the scientific outlook and vastushastra at Mumbai, Akola, Sholapur, Belgaon, Kolhapur, Ichalkaranji, Sangli, Jalgaon and many other places. Everywhere, I have had the same experience. During the debate held in Mumbai, a senior advocate in the High Court and the author of a book on vastushastra made a very formidable statement. 'That enterprise, the toilets of whose workshops are built in the north-east direction, is bound to fail. The north-east is the direction of the Lord and building toilets there is an affront to the Lord and

one can never escape His wrath.' He further added, 'If these toilets are shifted from there to the south-west with proper religious rites, then the abandoned workshops will start rolling again.' As we are aware, several workshops in the industrial colonies of Maharashtra are not functional. So in every public meeting I would ask people why the government doesn't shift the toilets of such workshops to the south-west if they happened to be in the north-east. This easy manoeuvre would restart many workshops that were lying idle leading to greater movement of capital and increase in employment. Of course, I had to make it clear that it is not possible or even advisable for ANiS to undertake such an experiment. But, I would insist, those who extol the virtues of vastushastra and want to raise it to the level of a science should provide the necessary evidence, and shifting these toilets afforded them a good opportunity to so.

Dr Pradip Patil, a scholar and ANiS activist, has written a book entitled *Bhramak Vastushastra* (Illusory Architecture). This book was released in a ceremony at Pune at the Bal Gandharva theatre. Dr Shreeram Lagoo had presided over the function. The whole function went off very well, but then I shared a piece of information that created a lot of ruckus. I said, 'Mr Paradeshi, on taking over as Commissioner of the Pimpri-Chinchwad Municipal Corporation, made changes to his official residential bungalow in accordance with vastushastra. The expenses, of course, were borne by the Municipal Corporation, that is, finally by the common tax payers. Mr Paradeshi, therefore, should refund this amount to the municipal corporation.'

In fact, it isn't my nature to indulge in imputations and counter-imputations. However, I received information about Mr Paradeshi just before the programme began from the previous commissioner. I was tempted to use this fresh and reliable news to give an edge to our movement and revealed it on the spur of the moment.

Newspapers began ringing Mr Paradeshi as soon as the programme was over. He denied it point-blank and challenged me to prove it. The information about the remodelling had been revealed to me by a very high-ranking officer, but being a responsible officer, he was not in a position to go public with what he knew. I was in a fix. On the other side Mr Paradeshi declared that he would file a defamatory suit against me.

Mr Dadasaheb Naiknaware, a well-known builder in Pune and also a senior well-wisher of the ANiS movement came to my rescue. He contacted Mr Paradeshi and expressed his desire to bring me and Mr Paradeshi together for a meeting. The meeting was arranged in Mr Paradeshi's house. Accordingly, we (myself and Mr Naiknaware) reached Mr Paradeshi's luxurious bungalow at 10 a.m. He had gone to the corporation office. Dadasaheb contacted him on phone. Mr Paradeshi did not like that we went directly to his house. We were a bit perplexed because it had been decided that we would meet him at his residence. Anyway, we then met him at his office, and discussed the matter with him. He expressed an interest in the ANiS movement, and reminded us that he had, as a district commissioner in Sholapur, put an end to animal sacrifice during religious fairs. He also claimed that he did not believe in vastushastra. I was stumped again; for by now I had realised that it was very difficult to get any concrete evidence that changes had been made in the residence just before he occupied it. All those who made the changes were his subordinates and the seniormost officer who gave me the information refused to come out in the open.

And here was Mr Paradeshi insisting that he did not believe in these things. What he said was important. Making changes in his residence was a matter of personal convenience and taste, while doing so as per vastushastra was superstition; and Mr Paradeshi was heatedly refuting the latter. So, I decided to accept his explanation and close the chapter. The three of us came out of his room and were immediately mobbed by newspaper men. I told them what had transpired and declared the matter closed. Mr Paradeshi who was still there did not contradict me. Later, I sent a note to all newspapers explaining my stand.

The news in all the newspapers the next day was completely in favour of Mr Paradeshi. It stated that I had withdrawn all my charges and accepted my mistake. As the municipal commissioner, it was obvious Mr Paradeshi, of course, had greater influence on the newspapers. Looking back at this episode, I now feel I made a mistake. I should have taken the news reporters and Mr Paradeshi to his bungalow, and shown them that the entrance to the house faced the north while it had faced the west before Mr Paradeshi occupied it. I should have

presented the earlier blueprint to prove that this change has been made recently.

At that time, I was not sure that I would be able to obtain the required evidence. This shortcoming in the charges I made was something of a setback to the ANiS movement. The movement, however, overcame the setback soon and raised its voice against vastushastra everywhere in Maharashtra, and moderately successfully at that. However, we have to accept the limitations of our movement, created by the huge vested interests favouring vastushastra, and people's anxiety about whether their house will be beneficial or harmful to them.

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The Challenge of Divine Wrath: Shani Shinganapur

The sanctuary of Shani Shinganapur in Nevasa taluka of Ahmednagar district is always in the limelight for its miracles. Devotees throng there in lakhs, thanks to news of it spreading due to television. Regarding such a sanctified place, a news headline appeared unexpectedly some years ago stating that I had given the following call: 'Come, let us go to Shani Shinganapur to steal.' This caused great commotion. Some people thought that ANiS activists were now urging people to steal, while others felt, 'At least they will now visit the sacred place!' Most people were angry. 'Who has given them the right to ridicule our gods and our religious rites? Let them not believe but who do they think they are to criticise the jagrit (awakened, miraculous) sanctuary of Shani Shinganapur and hurt our faith? Our sacred Shanidev is sure to hit back at them and we too, are not going to keep quiet,' they said.

The Maharashtra wing of ANiS were already aware of the so-called miracles of the place and were contemplating action regarding it. But the *Dainik Lokamat* published an interview of mine under the above title and all hell broke loose.

People praise Shani Shinganapur no end as the only place where no one dares steal and where thefts are non-existent. But the real situation comes to light when the records at the local police station are examined. For example:

- Crime dated 29/4/95. Rs 5,000 were stolen from Baban Lokhande, resident of Shimpi Takali, Taluka Niphad, District Nashik. Crime record No. C.R. 49/1995 I.P.C. 379

- Crime dated 30/4/95 the bicycle belonging to Sanjay Haridas Dardar, resident of Maka, Taluka Nevasa, District Ahmednagar was stolen. Crime record No. C.R. 52/95, I.P.C. 309. After investigation the bicycle was recovered from the culprit Kundalik Macchindra Phalake.
- Two young men, Vivek Varg and Sandeep Sahani went to Shani Shinganapur on Saturday, 5/8/95. At about 1.30 in the afternoon, they deposited their luggage in the rooms of the Devasthana Trust and went to have a bath. Rs 2,000 was stolen from their rooms but the theft was not reported.
- The motorcycle MH 17 B 947 belonging to Nanasaheb Thorat resident of Kharavandi, Taluka Navase, district Ahmednagar was stolen on Sunday, 2 June 1996 in the morning between 7.30 p.m. and 8 p.m. He lodged a complaint in the Sonai police station. This news was published in the daily *Sakal* on 7 June.
- The mayor of a town had his bath, wore a silk dhoti and went in to worship Lord Shanidev. On return he found that all his clothes had been stolen. He had to go to a shop in the silk dhoti (without his shirt) to buy new clothes.

Some outspoken individuals from this place tell us that there have been thefts all along, but people are bullied into keeping quiet about it. The shops in the area have no doors but are well secured at night. Shopkeepers keep their small change in an open box, but the big notes are tucked into their pockets and bundles of notes are deposited in the bank immediately. School teachers do not keep their important records in the open, because they will lose their jobs if these records are lost, and Shanidev cannot be relied upon to come to their aid.

Stealing power and water is a very common occurrence in Shani Shinganapur as it is everywhere else in Ahmednagar district. Those who steal power and water are not afraid of Lord Shani's wrath and live happily under his nose. What can be better evidence of Lord Shani being powerless in controlling these thieves than the fact that shopkeepers secure their cash box? This brings us to another question: should the cash box in front of the Lord be locked? Of course, not. People should put their money in an open container. But the reality is that the temple trust announces that the devotees should put their money

into the sealed box or deposit it in the office. The trustees are clearly in a dilemma. Putting a lock on the cash box is an affront to the deity and keeping it unlocked is practically an invitation to steal the cash. The trustees seek to resolve this dilemma by sealing the cash box at the bottom with nuts and bolts. The money comes in from a slit on top, and can only be removed by the trustees who then secure the bottom of the box again by tightening the nuts and bolts. It is ready again to receive cash and protect the Lord's prestige.

Worse than this is another tradition at Shani Shinganapur that discriminates against women. Women are not allowed anywhere near the deity, they are not even allowed to climb up the platform where it is positioned. There is a well there, which women are not allowed to touch because the water from the well is used to bathe the deity. Regarding this concept of pollution (by touch), Swami Vivekananda has asked a very pertinent question, 'How can those who get polluted by the mere touch of others purify anybody?' He further says, 'This notion of untouchability is a mental illness; beware of it. There is no gender discrimination in the "parabrahma" principle.'

'In which scriptural system (shastra) is it said that women have no right to worship, devotion or knowledge?' he asks again and adds, 'The countries that honour their women have been able to advance. Those countries and castes where women are not duly respected cannot advance. The main reason why you have remained so backward is the disrespect that you have shown to these icons of great power.'

Hence, ANiS insists that, in this age of gender equality, there should be no discrimination against women, even in the court of Shanidev. ANiS opposes the tradition of treating women as lesser individuals than men that is prevalent in all religions.

Some people sarcastically question us about this: 'If ANiS is neutral as far as god and religion are concerned, why do you ask for women to go to the temple?' Our stand is that a woman is independent enough to decide whether she should go to a temple. Like any other citizen of India, a woman too has the freedom of religion and can worship according to her choice. It is a fundamental right given by the Constitution; no religious authority or priest can deprive her of that right. This is consonant with the stand Sane Guruji adopted while agitating for

the entry of Dalits into Pandharpur temple.

The Ahmednagar district is where, in the past, Sant Dnyaneshwar wrote his seminal masterpiece *Dnyaneshwari* that spoke about equality and established the Bhagwat religion that preached, 'The whole world is engrossed in Vishnu and the Vaishnava religion which holds that discrimination is an evil.' In the same district, now, women are discriminated against, treated as lesser beings and insulted. Isn't this a mockery of religion and humanity? This was the background of ANiS's stand regarding Shani Shinganapur and its discrimination against women.

The Satyashodhak Samaj, founded by Mahatma Phule in the nineteenth century, had planned to hold a conference on 19 and 20 December 1998 at Sonai near Shani Shinganapur. The Satyashodhak movement has inherited a rationalist outlook towards critical examination of religious notions and practices, and opposes miracle-mongering and gender discrimination. This was a good opportunity for me to initiate a discourse on the subject of discrimination against women once again. I discussed it with the ANiS activists from the district. A very senior active member of the Satyashodhak Samaj, Kishan Haridas, had also earnestly invited me to give a talk. I thought it would be a good idea to attend both events, and also initiating further discussion on Shani Shinganapur and its various aspects.

The news that I was attending the Satyashodhak Samaj conference was met with violent opposition from Shani Shinganapur. A three-day bandh was observed and my effigy burnt. If I attended the conference, my adversaries had resolved to perform the thirteenth-day rite of my death in the same pavilion. Before the conference I was to attend an ANiS workshop in Ahmednagar. I was warned by the Bajrang Dal not to enter the city and told that my face would be blackened if I did not heed their warning. I reached Ahmednagar in the morning to attend a marriage, from where I would proceed to the workshop. The police had reached ahead of me, and were harassing the family to find out when I would arrive.

They warned me that I might be attacked, and that the police force might not be enough to protect me. Unheeding, I went to the venue of the workshop around 2 p.m. There were no protesters there. Appropriate precautions had been taken by the police, and I delivered my speech without incident.

At 3 p.m., a news conference was held at Hamal Bhavan and that, too, went off peacefully. However, as I came out of the hall, some seven or eight Shiv Sainiks rushed towards me shouting 'Jai Bhawani, Jai Shivaji', holding bottles of black ink. The police arrested them before they could reach me. But, in the scuffle, one policeman got black ink on his face. Later Baba Aragade, Kadu Patil, Vinayak Bangal and I went to see the district collector, who had expressed a desire to meet me. The collector and the chief district police officer were also present at the meeting.

The questions they asked were incredible. 'Why did you have to come all the way to Ahmednagar district instead of working in Satara and the nearby Kolhapur districts to eradicate superstition?' Then, 'Why do you oppose beliefs if people refrain from stealing out of fear of the deity, which is good? If a thief being afraid of ghosts desists from stealing in the night, where is the need to tell him that ghosts do not exist?' I simply told them that ANiS did not agree with their opinions. I also made it clear to them that the ANiS movement is carried on conscientiously with full responsibility. On our own, we would never create any law and order problems, but at the same time, no one can deny us the right to express our opinion out of the fear of some hooligans. After this I was taken to the border of the district and put on a bus under police protection. I could not attend the Satyashodhak conference, which had to be cancelled owing to certain developments.

While I had been greeted with many loud threats of attacks in Shani Shinganapur, the one issued by Dilip Sopal, the Minister of State for Justice and Law, topped them all. He publicly announced that, since I had hurt their faith, I should be kicked and taught a lesson. Shivaji Kardile, a member of the legislative assembly, challenged me to stand on the platform of Shanidev with my wife and experience the deity's wrath. (ANiS immediately accepted this challenge, and offered to send several activists to climb on to the platform with their wives and experience the deity's wrath with the public watching them.) My adversaries had declared that if I attended the Satyashodhak conference, they would sabotage it. Hence, the invitation given to me should be cancelled.

My stand was: the organiser of the conference is my friend. If he is in a spot and tells me so, I will not attend. However, this

change in its stance is not becoming of the Satyashodhak movement of Maharashtra. In any case, even if I do not attend the conference, several of my rationalist friends were going to attend, and would deal with this topic appropriately. (Among these friends were: Baba Adhav, Niloo Phule, Pushpatai Bhave, N.D. Patil, Pannalal Surana, Hari Narake, Govind Pansare and Y.D. Phadke.) As a result of the ruckus, the invitation given to me was withdrawn. But this did not suffice for those opposed to the conference. The taluk magistrate forwarded a report to the collector stating that the conference could provoke people's sentiments and cause a law and order problem. The district collector asked the organisers to submit an assurance that the situation would remain in control. It was difficult to give such an assurance; moreover, it seemed likely that the collector might still enforce Article 144 (preventing unlawful assembly). So, finally, the organisers decided to cancel the conference and avoid wasting time, money and energy.

The attitude of the Bajrang Dal, Shiv Sena and other similar organisations that had declared an agitation seeking to deprive people of their constitutional rights was trivialised as a mere law and order problem by the authorities. Moreover, the district administrator himself did not believe that the Shani Shinganapur bar on women was a superstition. To add to this, the chief organiser and the local leader of the Satyashodhak Samaj, Yashwantrao Gadakh, adopted a timid stand and tried to save the conference by cancelling the invitation extended to me. All of this created resentment.

A totally unexpected opinion had also been expressed by the Vice Chairman of Satyashodhak Samaj, Advocate Vasantrao Phalake, and Professor Gajamal Mali. They stated that I had sullied the atmosphere by criticising the faith and traditions of Shani Shinganapur. While I was to preside over the discussion on the topic, 'Religion and Superstition Are the Cause of Women's Subjugation', I had unnecessarily invited discontent and spoilt the atmosphere by talking about it in advance.

I replied briefly, stating that, although the ANiS and the Satyashodhak Samaj differed in their methods and working, there was a common thread of opposition to miracles and to gender discrimination on the basis of religion, because both institutions had directly inherited this from Mahatma Phule.

Mr Haridas, a senior and active member of the Satyashodhak Samaj had written a letter to me requesting that I take a public stand regarding Shani Shinganapur in connection with the conference. The President of the Satyashodhak Samaj, Vyankatanna Ranadhir, had also wholeheartedly supported the stand taken by me and ANiS. Despite this, I had already declared in the press conference that if my presence was likely to cause any difficulty, I would abstain from the conference. I wrote that, considering all these points, the criticism seemed uncalled for. I also added that ANiS had always considered the Satyashodhak Samaj as its senior partner and, therefore, politely asks for overt support from it for our action in Shani Shinganapur.

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The Vivek Jagar Debates

I came in rather close contact with Dr Shreeram Lagoo on the occasion of the play *Lagnachi Bedi* (The Shackles of Marriage). I had known him for quite some time by then, as I was secretary of the Samajik Kritadnyata Nidhi (Social Gratitude Trust) and Dr Lagoo its president; but our contact was limited to meetings of the trust. To collect funds for this trust, a unit of well-known actors participated in a series of thirty performances of the above play at different places. Dr Lagoo was present at a performance and that's how we got to know each other well.

It so happened that, at that time, a book entitled *Timirbhed* (Breaking the Darkness), on the eradication of superstition, was being written. I was given the responsibility of interviewing Dr Lagoo about how he had become a rationalist for the book. I interviewed him on the day of the last performance. He articulated his well-known views about god in his blunt, logical style. At the end he expressed his wish 'to pronounce these views of mine publicly all over Maharashtra if I can afford some time for it; and of course I am prepared for all the abuses that people will shower on me.'

I did not know then that he was going to get this opportunity soon and that I would be accompanying him.

By then, I had long lost my belief in god. There was a time in my life, too, when I would debate very earnestly that god does not exist. Later, ANiS resolved to adopt a neutral stand regarding god and religion. I did not agree with this stand at that time, but I had to concede to the majority in the organisation. Still, I made it clear that I would try to democratically convince others of my opinion and change the present resolution. This was all in the early years of the organisation.

Dr Lagoo was to go to Barshi via Sholapur to attend a programme. He was free for that morning in Sholapur. A local organisation availed of this opportunity and organised a public symposium on 'God and Religion'. There were four speakers, including myself and Dr Lagoo, and each of us was given fifteen minutes to express our views. The attendance was huge and people appreciated the programme. But Dr Lagoo and I both felt that it was much too short a time for a proper exposition on the subject. In the afternoon, while on the way to Barshi, I requested Dr Lagoo to spare a day some time in the next two months for me to organise a candid and open debate on this subject. He immediately agreed to the proposition, offering to spare two days instead of one. He had, by then, decided to reduce his work in films and commit himself to the propagation of rationalist thought all over Maharashtra. This programme was named 'A Debate on Vivek Jagar'.

The programme would entail interviewing both Dr Lagoo and myself on the basis of written questions asked by the public. The questions would be given to us prior to the programme. There would be two or three people conducting the interviews according to their convenience. As the programmes became more and more popular, many more organisations expressed their interest in organising them.

Of late, there has been a certain enthusiasm for glittering programmes that guarantee popularity and publicity. But we were not interested in organising our programmes through such groups.

Before every programme, a pamphlet on the following lines was circulated.

A Debate on Awakening of Reason

Participants:
Rationalist Film Artist: Dr Shreeram Lagoo
Spokesman of ANiS: Dr Narendra Dabholkar

The first and foremost superstition is the existence of god.
Retire this god now.
Where is the need for a god-based religion?

What we need is Humanism.
Every faith is a superstition.

Dr Shreeram Lagoo

There is a difference between faith and superstition
We are neutral as far as religion and god are concerned
The real need is the action essential to eradicate superstition.

Dr Narendra Dabholkar

A debate on topics much-discussed and of wide interest: Existence of god, Purpose of religion, Faith and superstition, Religious fundamentalism, Secularism and Eradication of superstition.

Please send your questions to the following address.

XXXXXXX

All are cordially invited

Venue:
Time:

I was very particular that these programmes be arranged by the branches of ANiS in the districts. This added heft to ANiS's work in the fields of both thought and action. At times, the local branches panicked a bit, but it was, a good practical lesson for them. We would travel everywhere in Dr Lagoo's car. Dr Lagoo was not only given no honorarium, but at times, the local branch of ANiS could not even pay for the fuel expenses. Deducting all expenses incurred, whatever remained with the local branches would be given to Dr Lagoo, which he would accept graciously without bothering to count. Generally, lodging arrangements were satisfactory, but at times, local impediments made even simple accommodation difficult. Dr Lagoo, however, never complained.

He had his share of admirers all over Maharashtra. So our programmes were always met with tremendous response from the public. The fact that such a great artist spared his precious

time for ANiS work brought prestige and popularity to our organisation. Dr Lagoo is fastidious about keeping time. He becomes uneasy, if for some reason, a programme does not commence on time. He would observe the time of departure to the minute. We were to speak at the Vivek Jagar programme in Kolhapur. Just two days before that programme, his son had passed away in an accident. I was in Aurangabad when this tragic incident took place and could not reach Pune. But even in this situation, Dr Lagoo did not forget about the programme and sent me a message, 'It is not possible for me to participate in the programme at Kolhapur. Forgive me. Maybe we will do it some other day.' Keeping one's word at any cost, and promptly informing those concerned in case it becomes unavoidable to carry it out, is a virtue rarely seen in public life. In social work, we come across the lack of this virtue every now and then and are reminded of how important it is.

It had become a rule over time that the programme would last for an hour and a half. Even when the programme was thoroughly enjoyable, about five to ten minutes before the end, Dr Lagoo would give me a hint by silently showing me his watch. Considering the expectations of the audience, I tried to direct more questions—mostly rational arguments—to Dr Lagoo, while I answered all questions regarding the movement. Both of us attempted to answer questions like 'How does the revelation of god take place?'

The topic of the discussion being of a rather intellectual nature, in about forty-five minutes, the audience would become fatigued. My exposition based on the movement's on-the-ground experiences proved something of a respite. An experience we had at Belgaum demonstrated how interested people were in this topic. Dr Lagoo was to reach Panaji by flight and proceed to Belgaum in a car. He was unexpectedly delayed even as the venue had filled up in anticipation of his arrival. Finally, the organisers decided to interview me first and Dr Lagoo on his arrival. I held fort for nearly an hour and the audience seemed engrossed. Dr Lagoo arrived later and the audience sat through his interview as well.

The Vivek Jagar discussions were very thought-provoking. Present conditions in Maharashtra are not conducive to such a liberal exchange of thoughts. It is obvious that the politicians

who have become brokers of god and religion to boost their politicking cannot afford to let people exercise their minds and brains. Often these days, arguments are substituted with blows.

One such incident took place at Sangli. Dr Lagoo was to return to Mumbai by the 10 p.m. train. The local organisers and I went to the railway station to see him off; there was still a little time before the train arrived. Suddenly, we saw a group of youngsters moving swiftly towards Dr Lagoo. Initially, we thought that they were his fans. But the moment they came close, we could make out that their intentions weren't pleasant. The station was crowded, and they did not know exactly where we were standing. 'Where is that fellow Lagoo?' someone enquired in an aggressive tone. They then rushed towards us and encircled us shouting, 'Jai Bhavani, Jai Shivaji, Sanatan Hindu Dharm ki Jai!' (Hail Bhavani, Hail Shivaji, Hail the ancient Hindu religion.) They introduced themselves as staunch religious activists of a fundamentalist Hindu organisation, and were angrily demanding to know, 'What did you say about our Hindu religion? How dare you abuse our god?' Dr Lagoo argued, 'If you want to know what I said, listen to my recorded speech; try to understand what I want to say and then we can discuss.' Of course, as they had come with the clear intention of initiating a scuffle, they were not interested in Dr Lagoo's explanation. They were hungry for some violent action. One of them demanded of Dr Lagoo, 'Say Jai Sri Ram'. We looked at Dr Lagoo. He was certainly not a man to be perturbed by such threats but he deliberated a little on this demand and shouted heartily 'Jai Shriram'. Then he paused for a couple of seconds and continued, 'Lagoo.' (Dr Lagoo's first name is Shreeram.) Even in that tense atmosphere we could not control our laughter. The angry mob was confused. The train had arrived by then, and Dr Lagoo safely entered his compartment, preventing an ugly incident.

In another incident, on our way to Kurduwadi, about eight Shiv Sainiks blocked our way and threatened us. They warned us not to talk about their god, threatening to disrupt our meeting if we did so. Although there were only about eight of them, the manner in which they confronted us indicated that they must have planned to create trouble and planted at least fifty people in the audience. We reached the venue and the programme began. Dr Lagoo calmly presented his views; I responded to it and this

went on for about forty-five minutes. There was no mockery of god in our entire talk and nothing that could be called objectionable. The planted agents of Shiv Sena could not find anything to offend their sentiments. They were overwhelmed by the whole atmosphere. The gang that obstructed us on our way to the venue could not keep quiet any longer. They tried their best to create confusion by clapping without reason, shouting slogans and generally making a nuisance of themselves, all to no avail as the public refused to respond. Finally, they left the hall, walked to the area behind the dais and began shouting loudly. This went on for five minutes or so, but by then the programme was almost over. In the end, while thanking everyone, the main organiser, Dr Vilas Mehta, strongly criticised the Shiv Sena for creating trouble.

During our tour of Nashik district, after successfully concluding our programmes, we retired to the government rest house for the night. We were to leave early the next morning to reach Kalavan in time for the 10 a.m. programme. At 1.30 in the night, I heard somebody knock vigorously. I opened the door and saw a jeep full of activists from Kalavan. They said that it wouldn't be possible to hold the next day's programme in Kalavan as Hindu organisations had threatened to disrupt it. The conference hall was in the middle of the town, and because it was the market day, a huge crowd was expected. The manager of the hall had refused to rent the hall to them fearing possible damage. They were refused microphones and police protection. In short, they were utterly helpless. Our ANiS branch at Kalavan was organisationally rather weak. Others who had helped in organising the meeting were also scared, and our activists were worried and nervous because of the strained atmosphere. It looked like the programme could not take place.

The deliberate violent disruption of our programme at Aurangabad just two months before this one (detailed later in the chapter) had made me determined not to succumb to the threats of these religious fundamentalists. Hence, the plea of the activists from Kalavan had no effect on me. But I felt it was not proper to wake up Dr Lagoo at such an unearthly hour to discuss the problem, and hence told them, 'I have decided long back not to cancel any programme out of fear of the threats issued to us. So, tomorrow Dr Lagoo and I will reach Kalavan at the appointed

hour; we will stand in front of the hall, in the middle of the marketplace if the hall is not made available, and address the public as loudly as possible since we will be refused the mic too. If anything objectionable is detected in our speeches the police are free to file a case against us. We will come to Kalavan to defend ourselves. We expect protection from the police and will request them accordingly. But our programme will not be cancelled even if we are refused police protection. We are prepared for all likely consequences. This is my decision. However, when Dr Lagoo wakes up in the morning, I will discuss the matter with him and abide by whatever decision he takes. Now, all of you may rest here for the night, meet Dr Lagoo in the morning and then proceed to Kalavan.'

They had not expected such a decision on my part. The fact that outsiders like us would dare to hold a programme in their town, while the resident organisers were trying to withdraw sheepishly, was an affront to their ego. Their stand completely reversed when I finished. With renewed enthusiasm they said, 'We need not wait to see Dr Lagoo. We will leave immediately and start preparing for the programme.'

I told Dr Lagoo about this incident in the morning. I was sure that his decision would be the same as mine. The only precaution that we decided to take was to park our car some distance from the venue of the programme.

We reached Kalavan at about 10 a.m. The atmosphere had certainly changed. Placards calling for a ban on our programmes had been removed and those advertising the Vivek Jagar meet prominently displayed at important places. The hall as well as the microphone were made available. The programme started under police protection. A few people did demonstrate and shout slogans just to save face. One member of the organising committee told them that this was a purely intellectual exchange that had nothing to do with provoking or criticising god and religion. The demonstrators realised that the atmosphere had changed and quietly withdrew. To our surprise, when we came out of the hall, we saw a board congratulating us for not criticising religion, placed prominently in the town centre.

We had a similar experience at Nanded. The mayor of Nanded, a staunch Shiv Sainik, declared that he would not let Dr Lagoo conduct any programme in Nanded since he criticised

Hindu gods and the Hindu religion. The police were under pressure, so the district chief of police invited ANiS activists and a member of the Rotary Club who was a co-organiser of the programme for a discussion. The Rotary Club member, scared of the threats and intimidation by the Shiv Sena, was apologetic about his role and offered to cancel the programme. But the president of the ANiS Nanded branch, Gunavant Patil-Hangerikar, who was also a strong activist of the Shetakari Sanghatana (Farmers' Union) refused to budge. He declared that the programme would take place at any cost, and he would consider a rethink only if the police were prepared to give it in writing that they were unable to provide protection. No police force would ever agree to such a demand as it would be detrimental to their standing. The programme was then fixed for 6 p.m.

For various reasons, we were delayed, and by the time we reached Nanded, it was already 7.30 p.m. This tour had been very lengthy and strenuous, and Dr Lagoo was fatigued. He asked me to do most of the talking, giving him some respite. At that instant, a senior police officer arrived at the venue. His request-cum-command was that we should not utter anything about god and let the programme proceed peacefully. I told him, 'We will talk about what we feel is essential to be told to the public. If you find anything objectionable in it, that's up to you to decide. And it is your duty to stop hooligans trying to disrupt a peaceful and orderly intellectual discourse.' The stressful situation perked up Dr Lagoo and his fatigue vanished.

The venue was packed to the rafters, with an audience that had been waiting for us for over two hours. The programme turned out to be a great success, with tremendous response from the audience. The mayor listened to us, sitting in his car parked near the hall. Of special importance was the fact that our programme was telecast live on local cable TV channels, helping us reach out to thousands of men and women in their homes.

An altogether different kind of incident took place at Taradgaon (taluka Phaltan, district Satara). Most of the people here belong to the Varkari sect. (This is a sect revolving around the worship of the deity at the Vithoba temple in Pandharpur. Pilgrims go every year on the eleventh day of Ashada—roughly corresponding to July—to the temple.) These people are great

devotees of saints like Dnyaneshwar and Tukaram and, naturally, a number of questions regarding the miracles of the saints were asked. We both answered them appropriately and logically. After the programme, we reached Phaltan for another discussion at 6 p.m. Members of the Varkari sect had put up placards trying to prohibit us from going ahead with the programme. On making inquiries, we were told that a week-long exposition of Dnyaneshwari was going on in the town, and somebody had spread a rumour that both Dr Lagoo and I would abuse their saints in our speeches. In the gathering, there were some people who had attended our programme at Taradgaon. They tried their best to convince the devotees that we would do no such thing. But emotions had already expelled reason from the minds of these devotees. A total shutdown was declared in Taradgaon the next day to oppose us. The townspeople mobbed the house of the organiser and our activist Surendra Ghadge. They tried to vitiate the atmosphere as much as possible.

Before going to Dahivadi next morning, we met with the police chief of the region. We requested him to give full protection to Ghadge. Further, we were prepared to go to Taradgaon and clear the misunderstanding that had been deliberately created. But the police officer advised us not to do so, and assured us that the town would remain calm. Later, all misunderstandings were cleared and the very people who had attempted to disrupt the programme helped Ghadge successfully organise many meetings about social change.

Attack at Aurangabad

The attack on us at Aurangabad was a particularly unpleasant experience. The Aurangabad Peace Foundation, Satyashodh ani Samata Vicharmanch (A Platform for the Search of Truth and Equality) and the daily *Apala Mahanagar* (Our Metropolis) together had organised a few Vivek Jagar programmes at Aurangabad. The first of these meets took place on the grounds of the Vivekananda College. The next one was organised in the Saraswati Bhavan auditorium. The programme went off very well. A few attempts at disruption were made, but they were not very significant. Dr Lagoo left the place as soon as the programme was over as is his wont, and I stayed behind as is

mine. Staying back allowed me to sort out people's doubts, to discuss problems of building the organisation and enlisting more subscribers for the magazine. Some activists approached me and began to bombard me with questions, which I attempted to answer logically as always.

Soon, I began to suspect that their intentions weren't entirely innocent; they were in a belligerent mood and weren't interested in my explanations. My guess was soon proved right. One of them came forward and landed two blows on my stomach. They were activists of the Patitpavan and the Bajrang Dal organisations, and threatened to beat me up and stall all further programmes. Then they took out their knives and belts and began to hit and threaten members of the audience who were still present. They raised slogans, 'Jai Bhavani, Jai Shivaji, Sanatan Hindu Dharm ki Jai!'

Women, ANiS activists and senior citizens who were still present tried to pacify the rowdy young men, but they were not in a mood to listen to anyone. Those who tried to plead with them included Advocate Pravin Vagh, Bhaskar Gangavane, Subhash Lamate, Professor Vijay Divan, Jaydev Dole, Nagnath Phatale, Pandit Munde, Uddhav Bhavalkar and Assistant District Collector Dilip Shinde. But they refused to listen to anyone. At this juncture they learned that Dr Lagoo was about to leave, and immediately ran towards his car and stopped him. They began arguing with him heatedly. In the meantime, word spread that the police had arrived. There was a short lull, during which they allowed Dr Lagoo's car which I had quietly slipped into, to leave. The angry mob then realised that the police had not arrived and so they began beating everyone with a vengeance. Four ANiS activists were severely injured. Two of them, Babasaheb Vakalkar of the Students' Federation of India and Bhaskar Gangavane, Director of the Association for Agricultural Products and Trade, had to be hospitalised. As is often shown in Hindi films, the police arrived on the spot when everything was over and the attackers had gone away. The then editor of the *Apala Mahanagar* , Nishikant Bhalerao, lodged a complaint against the attackers and a case of crime was registered under Sections 144, 344, 341, 323 and 504 of the Criminal Procedure Code. However, nobody was arrested until we left Aurangabad two days later. With the news of the disturbance spreading, the reserve police force was

called in. At the venue of the programme, Patitpavan activists had openly proclaimed that nobody would be allowed to utter anything about superstition and atheism in Sambhajinagar and had threatened to burn the offices of *Mahanagar* . Hence, armed police protection was provided to them. Dr Lagoo and I were also provided with police protection. We protested strongly against this hooliganism and were joined by many progressive organisations.

The incident was prominently reported on the front page by all the newspapers in Aurangabad. The *Tarun Bharat* and *Dainik Saamna,* both newspapers associated with Hindu organisations, attempted to misreport the events, stating that Dr Lagoo had spoken against Shivaji and the Hindu religion. 'Mean utterance against Shivaji Maharaj. Dr Lagoo takes to his heels!' was the headline of *Tarun Bharat* . The *Saamna* on the other hand published this headline: 'Shivaji told a lie . . . Hindu religion dishonoured.'

The next day Dr Lagoo and I held a press conference at the municipal corporation office. We presented our stand clearly. It was in short, as follows:

> In our society, at present, concerted efforts are being made to engender an atmosphere of intolerance and hatred. To change this atmosphere into a healthy, fearless and a sane one, we have undertaken this movement of Vivek Jagar. Violent attacks by fundamentalists will not prevent us from our mission. But it is very regrettable that, instead of encouraging the awakening of reason, some organisations under the patronage of those in power are opposing us systematically.

Dr Lagoo spoke in detail about what he had said, and how it had been deliberately misinterpreted and used for fomenting trouble. In answer to a question, 'Don't you think that the purpose of mythological and historical myths is to provide individuals a moral norm?' he had replied, 'Some problems arise from these myths. For example, we had a story of Shivaji as a small boy in our textbook in the school. Apparently, young Shivaji was playing with his playmates. They noticed that a cow

scared to death came running towards them. She was followed by a Yavan (Muslim). He asked them where the cow had gone. Young Shivaji saved the cow from being killed by indicating the opposite direction; this act of Shivaji was quite ethical but for that he had to tell a lie which is not ethical. Had Shivaji not resigned himself to this small immorality he would not have been able to save the cow.' There wasn't a word in it that disparaged or belittled Shivaji. And yet some newspapers chose to misrepresent it completely.

Justice given by the Press Council

After this violent incident at Aurangabad, we decided to approach the Press Council regarding the mischievous reporting of our programme by *Tarun Bharat* and *Saamna* . Chasing this matter was a gruelling process, but we were left with no alternative. A couple of days after these newspapers had published the news, I wrote to them stating that the version they had published was totally wrong and had badly affected the work of ANiS, and that they should, therefore, publish a fresh report giving a correct account of what had really happened as soon as possible. I received no reply. I sent them a registered letter the next time, which too received no response. Finally, we had to file a complaint with the Press Council. In this matter, one Hari Narke came forward to help us. The Press Council wrote to both these newspapers asking for their explanation. The *Saamna* wrote back saying, 'Our news was based on reality and we have given enough publicity to the next day's press conference of the people concerned. We have not indulged in any mischievous reporting. Dr Dabholkar is trying to mislead the Press Council deliberately.' *Tarun Bharat* chose to ignore even the Press Council.

After a lot of explanations and counter-explanations, our case was finally brought for hearing before the Press Council. The Chairman, Justice P.B. Sawant, was present at the hearing along with his colleagues. Dr Lagoo could not attend it. We had hired an advocate who went home after his morning work, promising to return in the afternoon. He too could not come back in time. So I decided to defend our case. Fortunately, since Justice Sawant was a Maharastrian, the proceedings were

allowed to be conducted in Marathi, which was a great advantage to me.

The Press Council generally listens to both sides carefully, and tries to resolve the dispute amicably and justly instead of engaging in tedious legalities. So Justice Sawant explained the matter to the representatives of both these papers and also told them a few things. 'Firstly,' he said, 'you are all aware that ANiS is sincerely working in the field of eradication of superstitions for many years. So when you called the students who were present there on the previous day and tried to figure out what happened there, you should have called Dr Lagoo and Dr Dabholkar too to present their side of the event before publishing the news.' Justice Sawant also asked of both the newspapers, 'Do you think that the work that the ANiS is doing is good and also necessary?' They both had to agree that it was so; they also had to meekly take his advice that it was their duty as newspapers to offer help to this organisation. The objection raised by *Tarun Bharat* was that what I had said about revelation was an affront to the Hindu religion. Justice Sawant made it clear to them that they needed to study religion more deeply. The concept of revelation is present in all religions and investigating it does not amount to an undue criticism of any religion. Moreover, reason is superior to any religion; and that 'Shivaji Maharaj duly recognised the superiority of reason over religion' is the essence of the story narrated by Dr Lagoo, and that strengthening this 'religion of reason' is what ANiS was doing. Justice Sawant took such a clear stand that I did not have to do much to defend us, except for being alert to stalling our adversaries' efforts at misleading him.

The verdict of the Press Council was that the two newspapers had to clearly and prominently publish clarification of the news these papers had earlier published and also apologise to both of us. Our responsibility was to provide the required explanation to them.

Before sending our explanation across, we informed all the other newspapers regarding the verdict of the Press Council, which most of them published on their front pages in bold letters. The editor of *Tarun Bharat* was irritated by the bold news in all the papers. In the covering letter sent to me, along with the issue in which our explanation had been printed, he said, 'In accordance with the verdict of the Press Council, your

explanation is printed in all copies of this issue of *Tarun Bharat* . You arranged to publish the verdict of the Press Council in all the newspapers first and sent an explanation to us later. It would have been appropriate if you had sent the explanation to us first and the verdict to other papers afterwards. What you did is not becoming of a rationalist like you.' What a loud cry by the thief himself! Our explanation published in both the newspapers was as below:

'We regret the news we published earlier about Dr Shreeram Lagoo and Dr Dabholkar. *Tarun Bharat* , Aurangabad and *Saamna* , Aurangabad had published a news item on 1 April '96 under the headline: "Mean Utterance against Shivaji Maharaj. Dr Lagoo takes to his heels." This has caused great harm to Dr Lagoo and Dr Dabholkar and their movement of "Vivek Jagar". The daily *Tarun Bharat* regrets the harm done to them by this.' They also published our explanation in full as below:

> The allegation that Dr Narendra Dabholkar had hired tough guys to beat the youngsters is a total lie. We severely denounce it. This movement of ours is always carried out at the intellectual level. The same news item also claimed that Dr Lagoo had said, "We have a lot of gossip about Shivaji; he was a man with no character. We are not told what lies Shivaji had told." Since Dr Lagoo has great respect for Shivaji Maharaj, it is impossible for him to utter such things about him. Putting such words in the mouth of Dr Lagoo is a fraudulent denial of the truth, and it is the duty of the editor of *Tarun Bharat* to find out how such a lie was published in this newspaper. In the programme at Aurangabad, Dr Lagoo used the story of Bal Shivaji to explain how a moral dilemma is resolved with the help of reason and discretion. On 22 April, Dr Narendra Dabholkar presented this view before the Chairman of the Press Council, Justice P.B. Sawant, and he too totally agreed that morality ought to be based on reason. Justice Sawant also brought to the notice of the concerned persons that the news caused a great deal of harm to good social (reform) movements. The editors should find out whether such news is spread in order to

slander deliberately those people who hold contrary views and stop publishing their thoughts.

The Vivek Jagar debate as well as the whole of the rationalist movement undertaken by ANiS is geared towards overcoming every challenge and impediment in the path of progress. It is marching forward today among various social strata with determination and enthusiasm. Our slogan is ‘Strive hard and build the history of the future.’ This is our dream.

27

The Path That Is Inevitable

A statewide seminar in association with the Rayat Shikshan Sanstha was organised in Pune to draft a declaration on education. The draft arrived at in this seminar was sent to educational institutions in Maharashtra for their consideration. Subsequently, it was decided that another seminar would be held at Jalgaon on 27 and 28 September, 2008, to discuss acceptance of the declaration by educational institutions. Some organisations, decided to be the brave knights of religion, and created a great deal of hullabaloo spreading misinformation about the seminar, targeting ANiS and me in their pamphlets that said:

'An atheist organisation Andhashraddha Nirmoolan Samiti has caused, in the name of "scientific outlook", a lot of commotion in Maharashtra, a pious state known for its saints, Sant Dnyaneshwar Mauli and Sant Tukaram Maharaj. Taking undue advantage of the government's policy of promoting a scientific outlook, they are trying to promote their atheist opinions and eradicate the Hindu religion. ANiS, which is out to destroy reason and shatter the social structure, is holding a statewide seminar on 27 and 28 September 2008 at Jalgaon. They state in their declaration that religious rituals are obsolete and are a waste of time, energy and money. They have condemned the religious practice of using rice grains for "Akshata" and waiting for a crow to peck the "Pinda" as superstitions. These are important practices according to our dharmashastra. Many such religious practices of the Hindus are now being studied in foreign countries like the USA and Japan. Many of them are recognised as beneficial and are being practised by people from these countries. The Constitution of

India guarantees freedom of religion to all citizens of India. But ANiS condemns these rituals as superstitions and ridicules them, which is destructive and a matter of great concern. It is, therefore, the duty of all citizens to insist on cancelling the ANiS seminar, which is destructive to society, and launch a criminal case against all its participants for hurting religious sentiments. ANiS is trying to get the bill on "Eradication of Superstition" passed by deceitful means. When thousands of people sent letters opposing this bill to the government, Dr Dabholkar collected signatures from students on a printed letter appealing to pass this anti-social bill and sent it to the government. So, Hindus! Wake up and see through this doublespeak of ANiS and oust them from society.'

I was to speak at Jalgaon on 24 September to celebrate the anniversary of the foundation of the Satyashodhak Samaj, which some Hindu organisations had threatened to disrupt. Since they did not find even one objectionable word in the whole speech, the local BJP and Shiv Sena chiefs began raising slogans just when I was about to conclude. Then they threw chairs at me. Still, the gathering remained calm. But the next day, the newspapers, instead of reporting my speech or commenting on it, printed the news item under the headline 'Hurling Chairs' and photographs showing the same. This, however, was not the end of it. Pamphlets were hurriedly printed misrepresenting my speech and putting perverse words in my mouth. Many times, I use Gadge Baba, the social reformer, as an illustration and speak about his sermons. For instance, I once spoke about how, at Pandharpur, Gadge Baba would ask people if a god who could not bathe, feed or clothe himself could do any good and concluded that he cannot. He went on to say that the real god did not live in temples but in our minds. And that it was the stomach of the priest that lived in the temple! In a sermon at Pandharpur, one cannot but mention Vithoba. How my exposition was presented illogically and viciously can be seen from the following account published by the publication *Sayandainik Saimat* of Jalgaon. The report said:

'There is an upsurge of resentment against Dr Narendra Dabholkar for his irreverent and outrageous utterance that Pandurang Vitthal of Pandharpur is not a god but a mere rock. The *Dainik Saimat* has sold like hot cakes, and on reading

Dabholkar's anti-religion and anti-god comments, people flung vehement abuses at him and reached for their shoes (to throw them at him). We wish to tell this feeble-minded Dabholkar who dares call our Vitthal a stone, "Dabholkar, you are a stone; your father is a stone, your whole family is stones!"

'I used to respect Dr Narendra Dabholkar, the ANiS supremo, despite my differences of opinion with him; never had I come across such a staunch atheist. Now my respect for him has changed into hate. He calls the deity of the folks of Maharashtra —the Panduranga Vitthal of Pandhari—a stone and not god. I was greatly enraged when this idiot Dabholkar called our Vithu Mauli, the most revered deity of crores of Marathi devotees, a stone. My hand reached for my shoe and I felt that such a man should be beaten with a shoe again and again. One of our readers, reading the report of Dr Dabholkar's speech in Saimat, wrote, "The fellow has become mad; he says your god cannot eat the offerings you make to him; all that is stolen by cats and dogs." No one will care for a man who says such things. Dr Dabholkar always makes shocking controversial statements like a revolutionary. In doing this, he wants to smear the mainspring of people's tribute and reverence (that is, Vitthal) with muck. He himself is a maggot of the muck. He and his vociferous fellow workers will soon be dragged into the court of law.'

This issue contained more such reactions. One of the reactions was that of Eknathrao Borse, President of the Washermen's Union of Maharashtra. He said, 'Dabholkar is a feeble-minded man and all the washermen's unions in the state have been told to target him. The government should charge him with the crime of making a speech vilifying Gadge Baba. He should publicly apologise for this. If he does not, the Washermen's Union will organise protest rallies against him.'

Along with this, the reaction of P.L. Shirsath, the President of the Rural Journalists' Union, which the paper claimed was received on the mobile, was also published. He said, 'Dr Narendra Dabholkar should not lose his senses while delivering a speech. This wild, irresponsible man should be restrained by the government; otherwise the Rural Journalists' Union will have to come out on to the streets to demonstrate. Dishonouring a great man like Gadge Baba is an insult to the

nation. The Maharashtra State Rural Journalists' Union will not tolerate this.'

After this, the Shraddhavardhan and Dharmarakshak Samiti organised a protest march in the city during which it was resolved that a protest will be held against the seminar organised by ANiS and disrupt it. A call was given to observe a complete shutdown of Jalgaon on 27 September, the day that the seminar opened. The *Dainik Saamna* of Jalgaon further sensationalised the issue by, adding two nasty sentences about the Shiv Sena supremo, Bal Thackeray, although I had not uttered a word about him in my speech.

The next day, the local reporter of *Saamna* happened to approach Tanajirao Bhoite, Secretary of the Maratha Shikshan Prasarak Sanstha and the chairman of the reception committee of the seminar, to secure an advertisement from him for a special issue on the anniversary of *Saamna* . Mr Bhoite asked the reporter why the paper was publishing such false news, and the reporter was able to offer no defence. Both these dishonest and misleading reports did make an impact. I received anonymous phone calls threatening me. One warned, 'Beware, you are talking about the Shiv Sena supremo. We are only waiting for his order; once we get it, we will not spare you!'

Meanwhile, the police served, me with a notice saying: 'You, that is, the Maharashtra Rajya Shikshan Sanstha Mahamandal, and Maharashtra State ANiS have jointly arranged a Seminar on 27 and 28 September 2008 for "Statewide Adoption of Educational Declaration on Scientific Outlook and Eradication of Superstition". On 26 September, some Hindu organisations marched to the district collector's office and submitted a memorandum cautioning him that the ANiS activists were likely to hurt religious sentiments.

'Kindly instruct those concerned to take care that none of the speakers hurt the personal or religious sentiments of anybody. In case derogatory remarks against any religion are made, leading to law and order problems in the city of Jalgaon, kindly note that you will be held responsible and a criminal case will be launched against you and the concerned individuals according to law.'

Although the seminar took place against this background, the discussions that took place were very disciplined, as also enriching and purposeful. It was, of course, held under extensive

police bandobast.

For some reason or the other, various adversaries keep targeting me for attacks. Narendra Maharaja is one such person. He has a reason to hate me. In one of his interviews he had mentioned, 'Eradication of superstition is not the task of the likes of Narendra Dabholkar and N.D. Patil and their foreign bookish science. These great men are in the business of eradicating our Indian culture itself under the name of eradication of superstition. They target only Hindus. They are out to destroy the lofty religiosity of our Indian culture. What they do under the guise of eradication of superstition is nothing but an attack on people's religiosity. If people follow Dabholkar, they will become irreligious, leading to shameless licentiousness. Narendra Dabholkar is corrupting the society.' This was not all.

In his sermon, Narendra Maharaj instigated his devotees to 'break the limbs of Dabholkar and N.D. Patil' and at Shirala he accused us of being hired by Christian missionaries to destroy Hindu religion', and of eradicating faith instead of superstition; the latter being his constant complaint against us. When journalists asked me to respond to these comments, I said, 'Oh god of Narendra Maharaj, please pardon him for he does not know of what he speaks.' In response to the threats he issues, I was advised to seek police protection since I am often alone, especially during odd hours of the night, and secondly, to keep a licensed pistol with me. But these kinds of safeguards will negate the very essence of the movement.

For a long time, I have been involved in drafting a law to prohibit black magic and superstition. At one stage, Sham Manav raised an objection regarding the draft of the law. Taking advantage of this, the Hindu Janajagaran Samiti sent a press note to all newspapers saying, 'Dr Dabholkar, the heretic who is grievously deceiving the government and the populace should be ousted from the committee for the law on eradication of superstition. P.B. Sawant, the retired Supreme Court justice, has opined that the draft of the law earlier made by the working president of Maharashtra ANiS, Dr Dabholkar, and sent to the then governor for his consent can label many of our customs and traditions, like Satyanarayan Puja fasts, as criminal acts. This was disclosed by Sham Manav at "Matoshri" when he met with Uddhav Thackeray to discuss this subject. This makes it clear

that Dr Dabholkar's claim that this law is not about religion, nor detrimental to any religion, is dishonest and misleads both the government and the people. Under such circumstances, it is improper to invite Dr Dabholkar to any meetings regarding the law and a proper inquiry should be made to investigate into the matter. He should be barred from attending any other meetings too. We, the Hindu Janajagruti Samiti, submitted this plea to the government on 28 November. In order to expose the real face of Dr Dabholkar, we request you to publish this appeal in your journal.'

In 2006, the Maharashtra Foundation of USA awarded me a prize worth Rs 10 lakhs with a citation of 'Best Social Worker'. I went to the US to accept this award. The Sanatan Sanstha in its daily *Sanatan Prabhat* printed on their front page a banner headline spread over eight columns. It read, 'Condemnation of Maharashtra Foundation of USA for giving an award to the infidel Dr Narendra Dabholkar.' The news item further said, 'The Maharashtra Foundation of America, an institute that does not respect the sentiments of Hindus, has declared the "Best Social Activist of the Decade" award to Dr Dabholkar, the working president of the anti-religious Maharashtra Andhashraddha Nirmoolan Samiti. The award ceremony will be held at New Jersey at the annual gathering of the Maharashtra Foundation.' After this came an appeal in bold script, 'Giving this award to Dr Dabholkar, who is trying his best to enact the anti-religious law against superstition, is rubbing salt on the injuries caused to the Hindus. Dr Dabholkar and his ANiS criticise Hindu religion and the saints of Maharashtra, a state that has a long tradition of saints. O Hindus, condemn the Maharashtra Foundation of USA and do not allow them to give away this award to Dr Dabholkar who assaults your religious sensitivities.' This report was accompanied by the email ids and postal addresses of Sunita Dhumale, President, Maharashtra Foundation; Sunil Deshmukh, chief of the awards jury and a group of young members of the foundation. Emails protesting the giving of the award to me had reached the US before I did. It is another matter altogether that the emails congratulating me for winning the award far exceeded those protesting it. The award ceremony went off very well indeed.

In another instance, ANiS activists had conducted a teachers'

training workshop at Ambejogai. Some self-styled saviours of the Hindu religion created a commotion regarding the views said to have been expressed by some of the activists and launched a criminal case against them. Later, a stay order was given by the Aurangabad bench of the Bombay High Court against this court action. A hearing regarding invalidation of this case was still in suspension before the court. But, on the strength of this slight evidence, some organisations with vested interests created quite a ruckus. This is what followed.

There were some demonstrations against us in Ambejogai and nearby areas in Beed district, Maharashtra. This is understandable. But these organisations instigated a few Shiv Sena and BJP MLAs to sit in dharna at the entrance of the Vidhan Sabha. The poster behind these MLAs said, 'ANiS should apologise to the Hindu religion and saints'; the second demand went much further, it said, 'Narendra Dabholkar and all his office bearers should be expelled from Maharashtra!' The sit-in lasted for two hours and was withdrawn at the request of the minister in charge of legislative assembly affairs. This was published as important news in the next day's *Dainik Lokmat* . I thought an explanation was called for. But on second thoughts, I realised that no other newspaper or the electronic media had taken note of the incident, nor had there been any discussion in the legislative assembly. So I kept mum. Their attempt at stifling me had failed once again.

The government had given us a written assurance that it would pass the bill on the banning of black magic. At every session of the assembly, we expected that the bill would be passed but it was always postponed to the next session for some reason or other. After one such session, I wrote an article to express ANiS's indignation at being cheated in the legislative work of the assembly. A Shiv Sena MLA sent a breach of privilege notice against me to the Speaker of the Assembly, which was duly served on me. I answered it explaining the logic of my arguments without bothering to consult anyone. It seemed to have satisfied the speaker and required no further action.

Then there was a third incident where the thorny interventionist path became unavoidable. The daughter of Bhanudas Kanhoji Adbhai of Rahuri (Ahmednagar district) studied medicine, and as soon as she qualified as a doctor, she

left home to join the Sanatan Sanstha at Panvel and began to stay in their ashram. She refused to meet her own father. Adbhai and his daughter were both followers of the Sanatan Sanstha. But the father never expected that his daughter would take such an extreme step. The aggrieved father, therefore, approached ANiS. An article written by him, 'A Father's Grief', was published in the ANiS magazine. I also held a press conference along with him, where he spoke about his distress. This was reported in *Maharashtra Times* , *Lokasatta* and the Satara edition of *Tarun Bharat* . Two criminal and two civil cases were filed against me on the basis of the reports in *Lokasatta* and *Maharashtra Times* . In addition, due to the news item in *Tarun Bharat* , two cases, one criminal and one civil, were filed against me in Goa.

In a similar incident, a case was filed against me in the Delhi High Court for an article I wrote on Nirmala Mata in the monthly *Lokaprabha* . I fought for eight years and finally won the case. These people never filed a case against any newspaper. Two followers of the same Sanatan Sanstha of Panvel were indicted for a bomb blast at a theatre in Thane. *Saptahik Chitralekha* published a cover story on the blast and included an article that I had written much earlier about the Sanatan Sanstha of Panvel. Again, the Sanatan Sanstha at Ponda (not the one at Panvel) launched defamation cases against me (and also the weekly *Saptahik Chitralekha*), claiming damages of one crore rupees. In addition, a criminal case was also filed there.

There were other cases too. A civil and a criminal case had been filed in the Bombay High Court against me and the *Andhashraddha Nirmoolan Vartapatra* (the ANiS magazine) for publishing Adbhai's article; two civil and criminal cases against me and *Vartapatra* for taking notice of an academic programme against the Sanatan Sanstha at Goa; one more civil and criminal case against me for the cover story on the followers of the Sanstha who were taken into custody for their criminal fundamentalist activities, published in *Vartapatra.* The number of cases against me by this organisation totalled fourteen, and the amount I was supposed to shell out was four crores! Out of these fourteen cases, I won two cases in the Bombay High Court and one in Goa. The rest continued to drag on.

My policy in these situations is to keep cool. I know that these cases are inevitable and I should not allow myself to be

scared or confused by them. I should not take them lightly nor fight with all the strength I can muster, nor should I get frustrated but hire competent advocates and raise funds to pay them if necessary. Of course, I am fortunate enough that renowned advocates, like advocate D.V. Patil, Dattajirao Mane and others, have rendered legal assistance to me and to ANiS free of charge. All these things transform our difficulties into opportunities, making me and the movement more confident and bring home to our adversaries the lesson that they cannot obstruct our movement by dragging us down with law suits. We always uphold the truth and never indulge in slander. Naturally, we win all the cases and are acquitted honourably. One more important aspect of our policy is that we do not believe in tit for tat. We could easily file defamation cases too, but ours is the path of awakening people and of constructive action. Wisdom does not lie in filing court cases.

28

Does ANiS Keep Mum about Brahminical Rituals and Brahminical Buvabaji?

Around the year 2000, there was a new outcry against ANiS. This was something begun by the BAMCEF (Bahujan, Minorities and Scheduled Castes Employees' Federation). Their grievance was that ANiS was tongue-tied when it came to criticising brahminical rituals and superstitions and brahmin buvas and babas. They accused ANiS of this at many places publicly. Not only was this allegation wrong, but it was also painful and damaging to the movement. ANiS activists have always tried to avoid confrontation and refrained from replying when such misleading allegations were made, keeping in mind the larger interest of the movement. The truth of the matter, however, must be told.

What was their charge?

These organisations believe that systemic of exploitation stems from the vedic brahminical religion, which becomes noticeable in the character of the brahmins. Some of these people maintain that they are against 'brahmanya' (the age-old hauteur of occupying the topmost position in the hierarchy) and not against those who are brahmins by birth. But the majority of them openly oppose those who are born brahmin. They maintain, 'There may be some brahmins who are not tainted with brahmanya but they do not meet with us, nor do we come across any.' The rest of them don't even need to explain their brahmin antagonism. What the RSS says about Muslims in their mouthpiece *Vivek* is well known. They maintain, 'Every Muslim

is not a traitor; but every traitor invariably is a Muslim.' Making a minor change in this statement, the above anti-brahmin contention can be reformulated as, 'Every brahmanya-tainted person is not necessarily a brahmin, but every brahmin is surely tainted with brahmanya.' The Maharashtra ANiS does not have to defend itself against the accusation that it targets only one religion to eradicate superstition. Similarly, it does not feel the need to answer the accusation that it avoids talking about the rituals and about godmen belonging to a particular caste. Even those who accuse ANiS know the reality of the situation. We must, therefore, try to investigate the hidden purpose of these accusations.

ANiS's mission is mainly eradication of superstition, which our activists from about 180 branches are engaged in throughout Maharashtra. Keeping aside the issue of measuring the success of our movement in eradicating superstition during the last twenty years, [5] for the time being, our work obviously has created a singular social reality in Maharashtra. This period of ANiS's progress since its inception has coincided with the period of the Mandal Commission movement, and there was considerable influence of this on the political process. Naturally, a majority of the organisations built up during this period do act under a caste banner either overtly or covertly. They all talk about caste exploitation and eradication of the caste system, but in reality, because as they organise on the basis of caste, they are actually strengthening their caste (and its grip on the people of that caste). Herein lies the uniqueness of ANiS vis-à-vis other organisations. ANiS by the nature of its organisation has consciously attempted to move beyond caste. Our activists hail from various castes, the branch committees, district committees, and the state working committees consist mainly of Bahujan (people from non-elite castes). But none of these members at any level were ever elected or even nominated on the basis of what caste they belonged to or did not belong to. This in itself is a great achievement in the history of Maharashtra. Moreover, there are no factions and bickering in the organisation. This fact can be verified by anyone who investigates our structure. Such a statewide organisation that has, in practice, gone beyond religious and casteist pride (and also prejudice against other religions and castes) and is working in unison, naturally becomes

an object of jealousy and criticism for others.

On the action front

The test of the theoretical construct of any movement lies not in intellectual discussion about its activities, but in the extent to which its activists defend in practice the principles on which their movement is based, even in adverse situations. ANiS is fighting against superstition on all fronts. So, along with other aspects of its work, it has fought and continues to fight against brahminical rituals. Buvas and maharajs are a source of exploitation and mental slavery. ANiS is the only organisation that has been struggling against buvabaji continuously for the last twenty years. During this struggle against buvabaji, it has never bothered about the caste or religion to which any particular buva belongs. Details of some of these struggles are given below:

- A famous school in Pune celebrated its Golden Jubilee by performing sixty Satyanarayan poojas simultaneously. The Pune branch of ANiS observed a day-long sit-in strike against it. Our activists sat there throughout the day, risking public wrath, and also arranged for a suggestion box at the venue to collect people's reactions. On the top of the box was written 'Express your mind'. People reacted in huge numbers. On opening the box, we realised that at least half the reactions were supportive of ANiS's action. This was quite encouraging, but more importantly, after this protest, no educational institution has performed Satyanarayan poojas publicly.
- The Vedas are the foundation of brahminical culture and astrology is a minor branch of the Vedas. No organisation has acted against this so-called jyotish shastra as repeatedly and as effectively as has ANiS, repeatedly explaining why astrology was a sham and not a science (see Chapters 2 and 22). ANiS has also carried out training projects for school and college teachers on 'Scientific Perceptions', training about 15,000 teachers and lecturers in working to eradicate superstition, which included a lecture entitled 'Astrology and Science'.

- ANiS has sent letters to many recognised astrologers from Maharashtra, a little before the elections, requesting them to predict the likely results based on their astrological knowledge. A sum of twenty-one lakh rupees was offered to those who accepted the challenge to predict results correctly. Not a single astrologer dared accept the challenge so far.
- A convention of the All India Council of Astrologers was held in Satara. ANiS asked the organisers a question every day. They could answer none. Then, ANiS activists gathered as many young men and women as were willing to bring their horoscopes and burn them in front of the convention, because horoscopes are a graphic representation of fatalism. This caused a big hue and cry and the activists were warned that they would be arrested if they carried out this programme. To insult me, who was the instigator of the programme, the astrologers wrote my name on a donkey and took it around the town in a procession. Despite all this, the programme of burning horoscopes was a great success (see Chapter 22).
- ANiS did not leave any stone unturned to stop the move of the University Grants Commission to introduce astrology as a subject of study in the universities. We appealed to all the vice chancellors of Maharashtra universities and received an encouraging response from them (see Chapter 23). The then minister for higher education, Dilip Valase Patil, informed the UGC that, instead of astrology, a course on Water Conservation be developed. ANiS also filed a writ petition in the Aurangabad division of the Bombay High Court. A short while after this, the Supreme Court upheld the decision to teach astrology in universities. When ANiS examined this verdict of the Supreme Court in detail, it discovered that the Supreme Court had ordered that status quo be maintained in keeping with its policy of not passing any judgement on the report of the experts' committee appointed by the UGC. It meant that if the UGC appointed a new committee of experts and that committee rescinded the earlier decision, the Supreme Court would not raise an objection to it. In the meantime, there was a change in the Central government as a result of elections. The newly

elected party had assured the public that they would stop 'saffronisation' of education. ANiS attempted to ensure that the ministry of human resources in keeping with the party's election promise, appointed a new committee to prevent astrology from being introduced into the university syllabus. (The new government did keep its promise, and astrology was not introduced as a subject at university level.)

- ANiS during this period had also declared its readiness to hold a debate with any astrologer on any platform in Maharashtra on 'Is Astrology a Science?' But no astrologer accepted this challenge.
- A lot of research has been carried out on astrology in other countries, concluding that it is not a science. ANiS conducted a test in Pune. It collected information about the date, time and place of birth of schoolgoing children of two categories—the intelligent ones who always passed with flying colours and others who had learning difficulties—and sent it to astrologers. The astrologers were expected to make horoscopes for every child and identify which child would do well and which would not, according to their horoscopes. This was conducted under the guidance of the famous astronomer Dr Jayant Narlikar, and Pune University helped us in statistical analysis. Thus, ANiS has put up a broad front against astrology.
- Like astrology, there is another branch of brahminical learning called vastushastra. This discipline in fact should not be called vastushastra but vastushraddha to make it clear that it is a faith or a fake science, and not real science (shastra). The deceptive vastushastra is far removed from the scientific practice of architecture. It misleads an individual. (See Chapter 3 for a detailed discussion on this.) The whole shastra overtly props up fatalism. To oppose this unfortunate trend, ANiS organised a statewide conference to prepare a Scientific Declaration on Vastushastra at Pune. A group of architects and rationalists helped ANiS in this effort. With their collaboration, a declaration signed by Dr Jayant Narlikar was published. ANiS also wrote a number of articles to expose the buvabaji in this business. Two books in Marathi—*Bhramak*

Vastushastra (Deceptive Vastushastra) by Dr Pradeep Patil and *Searching for the Sun in Candle Light* by Arvind Pakhale —were published. These are the only books written in Marathi talking about the scientific aspect of this subject. ANiS also organised lectures, seminars and discussion on 'Vastushastra and Scientific Outlook' in almost all districts of Maharashtra. Along with this, ANiS also accepted the challenge of staying in houses declared inauspicious by vastushastra (see Chapters 3 and 24).

- The Satyashodhaki Way of Marriage was propagated by Mahatma Phule to get rid of the dominance of Brahmani Purohitshahi (the priestly class). No priest is required in this system of marriage. The eight stanzas that are recited at the time of marriage are based on modern thinking, and contain a commitment by the groom promising to treat the bride on an equal footing. Another characteristic of these stanzas is that one stanza is recited by the bride, one by the groom and one by the guests. Mahatma Phule wished to avoid the wastage of rice and suggested that petals be showered on the bride and the groom. ANiS has initiated the marriage of couples through this novel ritual, making some changes, but keeping the core of the procedure conceived by Mahatma Phule intact. The first marriage that ANiS performed in this fashion was that of the son of ANiS activist Dr Macchindra Wagh of Nevasa on a new moon day (traditionally considered inauspicious) in the mid-nineties. Thereafter, ANiS has performed over 160 marriages in this manner in various districts. ANiS activists have thus proved that they walk their talk.

  ANiS has also made a few changes in this process of marriage. We display the photos of Mahatma Phule and Savitribai Phule on the dais. Along with the bride and groom, their parents, who accepted this singular style for the marriage of their son or daughter, are also felicitated with flowers. Next, the bride and the groom are introduced to all the guests. This is followed by short speeches by a few people congratulating and supporting the couple for taking this step. Finally, the bride and the groom take oaths, garland each other and are declared man and wife. One more important characteristic of this marriage is that

ANiS tries to keep the expenses to a minimum, and ensures that the money saved is put in fixed deposits in the names of the couple. Thus these marriages are not only satyashodhaki, but also marriages with savings.

- Those who believe in the concept of Kundalini Jagriti claim that every human being has a kundalini in his/her body, which can be awakened through the practise of yoga. When it rises up through the six circles situated in the back and passes out through the 'brahma randhra' in the palate of the person, he/she becomes omniscient. Nirmala Mata is active in the propagation of kundalini. She claims that she has invented a unique way of practising yoga and trains people to awaken their kundalini in ten minutes. This guarantees permanent bliss and health to the trainees. ANiS challenged this claim in her programme at Pune and Satara. When we demonstrated against her at Angapur in Satara taluk, her cronies attacked me and other activists and beat us up. They then launched a criminal case against us in the court at Satara which dragged on for eight years. Our activists had to attend court proceedings, absenting themselves from their jobs. All were declared not guilty and discharged honourably. Nirmala Mata then appealed to the high court, but in vain. Not being satisfied with causing this much trouble, she launched a defamation case against me for the article that I wrote in this connection. The case was filed in Delhi High Court, which too dragged on for eight years. Thereafter, in 2005, when a programme was arranged for her in Satara with great hype and publicity, ANiS opposed it with a satyagraha. Nirmala Mata had to cancel her programme.
- The most important ritual of the vedic religion is the conduct of a yagna (fire sacrifice). A deliberate attempt is being made to revive and propagate yagna culture in Maharashtra. A year-long yagna ceremony was undertaken in Gangakhed of Parabhani district. ANiS opposed it and a seminar arranged in this regard was attended by Dr Shreeram Lagoo and A.H. Salunkhye which proved successful despite opposition from the town. A small booklet written by Salunkhye on yagna was printed and released during the seminar. Another 'great yagna',

Shriram Mahayagna, was performed at Satara; ANiS activists demonstrated against this too and also got themselves arrested. There was a large-scale movement against the yagna at Kolhapur in which ANiS too participated. We demonstrated against the yagna ceremony at Barshi also. Wherever such yagna rituals were performed in full public view, ANiS activists go all out to demonstrate against it and oppose it both through advocacy and confrontation.

- Every twelve years, lakhs and lakhs of people assemble in Nashik for a fair called 'Sinhastha Parvani'. Following are the famous lines of Sant Tukaram about those devotees.

> *Ali ali Parvani: Nhavya bhata zalee dhani*
> *Varavara bodi doi dadhi: Antari papachya kodi*
> (Come Parvani, a rare pious occasion;
> A golden opportunity for the barber and the cleric;
> Outward cleansing, shaving beard and head;
> But the mind full of sin.)

That Parvani is a great opportunity to earn for the bhats (priests) is clear from the above line. During this period that comes only once in twelve years, huge crowds of devotees gather near the river for a dip in it. Thousands of sadhus, many of them in groups, also gather in Nashik from all over the country. At one such Parvani in 2003, the government had to spend Rs 448 crore to facilitate infrastructure and security arrangements. The government argues that, since devotees gather here in such huge numbers, it is necessary to provide amenities to them, and also that, since the amount is spent in permanent developmental work, there ought to be no criticism.

ANiS is against the very idea of bathing at any auspicious moment to cleanse oneself of sins committed. One who feels the need for such a ritual has the right to do so in accordance with our Constitution. However, to use the taxpayers' money to provide comforts to such people is objectionable. It should be

used to improve our much neglected education and health systems instead. ANiS also believes that fairs like the Sinhastha Parvani greatly encourage superstitions. In 1991, when it took place, ANiS was still a fledgling organisation; yet, it took a stand against the fair. And in 2003, it was the only organisation to oppose the Sinhastha Mela. An attempt was made at Nashik to form a committee of like-minded organisations to oppose the fair, but it was not very successful. ANiS decided to go it alone. We wrote a booklet on this issue and published it in Nashik. We made 5,000 beautiful multicoloured posters of Sant Tukaram's opinion regarding Sinhastha, as well as of the poem 'Sinhastha' written by the great poet Kusumagraj, and displayed them all over Maharashtra. When other media agencies were congratulating themselves for reporting on the Sinhastha with great fervour, we chose to bring out the other, rather disgusting side of the whole show before the public. This we did through several interviews broadcast on the Akashvani (All India Radio) and the local cable channel, TY. No other organisation ventured to do this kind of work.

- The ritual of pindadan is another ploy of the brahmin clergy to earn their bread (and a thick slice of butter). Many people have written on it earlier. ANiS, too, extensively wrote on this issue to awaken people to the real purpose of pindadan. But we did not stop at that. One branch of ANiS made a six-foot human idol and hung it in the town centre. On the tenth day, the activists performed the ritual of pindadan for the idol. Another activist, on his own birthday, made pindadan to himself in front of his wife and children. However the pinda was not a rice ball, but a very tasty eatable. The belief behind pindadan is that the soul of the departed individual returns on the tenth day at the cremation ground. Only the crows see it and discern whether that soul is happy or not. The crow will touch the pinda only if the soul is happy. The crows that are used to getting tasty food, of course, finish the pinda in a jiffy. How can it be connected to whether it sees the soul and

judges happiness levels? Performing a scientific test of pindadan along these line sounds a bit ostentatious, but it has the power to shock people out of their erroneous religious concepts. So, a little later, we declared one such public programme of pindadan. The self-styled saviours of religion immediately raised their voices against it. Their cry reveals how powerful this programme of giving shock treatment to brahminical rituals is (see Chapter 1).

- The allegation that ANiS does not oppose any brahmin baba–buvas is simply ridiculous. Superstition is the black-marketing of faith, and every caste and religion has its black-marketeers. We ought to oppose this because it involves exploitation caused by the brahminical outlook. But superstition is not exclusive to the brahmin caste. Brahminism consists of inherited prestige, birthright to advantageous systems, the theory of karmavipak, the ideas of prarabdha and niyati and many such concepts and practices. ANiS never opposed any buva or baba because of his or her caste; we opposed them for their unscientific propositions and exploitative schemes. At present, Asaram Bapu is the talk of the town. [6] He wrote a book named, *Yauvan Suraksha* (Safeguarding Youth), which is full of very unscientific information regarding sex life. Such information, instead of guiding young men and women and safeguarding youth, actually confuses and misleads them. To rebut Asaram Bapu's thesis, ANiS, with the help of renowned experts in this field, compiled and published a book to scientifically inform youth about the scientific approach to the matter. ANiS received a number of threats for this act.

  Aniruddha Bapu is one more such godman whom ANiS has opposed. We published a cover story in our magazine's annual issue exposing the real nature of this so-called great man. Narendra Maharaj is an excellent example of the brahminism of a non-brahmin. He was not born a brahmin, but he got himself decorated with the title of 'Dharmacharya' (great religious preceptor) by the Dharmapeeth at Kashi, and now flaunts it before the congregation in the Sinhastha Mela. ANiS has been fighting a lone battle against this Maharaj for the last eight years. It

exposed the real face of Narendra Maharaj to the public through a one-on-one dialogue with him in his own math at Nanij, compelling him to withdraw his claims of miracles. We have also publicly exhibited the film recording of this dialogue throughout Maharashtra as well as attempted to alert people through pamphlets, posters and other such means wherever he held his programmes. We have even sat in strikes and demonstrations to oppose him (see Chapter 16).

- The concepts of 'atma' and 'paramatma' are the main constituents of the foundation on which the huge edifice of brahminical superstition stands. The Prajapita Brahmakumari sect has exploited these concepts extensively to set up their empire in India. To find out what this organisation really is, our representative visited their main office at Mount Abu and published a report in our annual issue. No other organisation has attempted any such reporting so far. Some participants of the programmes arranged by Prajapita Brahmakumari at Islampur felt that they had been cheated, but did not have the courage to file a complaint. ANiS gave them full support and helped them register a police complaint. A public meeting was held in the town to oppose the organisation wherein I was the main speaker.
- Hindu right-wing forces often attempt to acquire the facade of a 'party of the common public' and speak of forgetting the varnas (the four fold division of Hindu society into Brahmin–Kshatriya–Vaishya–Shudra) and castes and going beyond them, but what they really mean by Hindu religion is the sanatan (orthodox) vedic brahminical religion.

ANiS wants to critically analyse the concept of dharma, which might hamper the activities of Hindu right-wing forces. Hence, they create confusion in programmes arranged by ANiS. These right-wing forces have different faces. Sometimes they are the volunteers of various organisations; at other times they are disciples of Narendra Maharaj; they might even come as agents of the Sanatan Sanstha. But whatever the guise, their aim is to disrupt public meetings organised by ANiS. Activists from these

organisations suddenly get up and start arguing heatedly when the programme is in full swing, or in the midst of an absorbing speech. They shout slogans and cause chaos, almost like it is a religious obligation to be carried out with enthusiasm. But with satyagraha being their guiding principle, ANiS activists manage to keep their cool and refrain from counter-attacks. With determination, they carry out their programme to its planned conclusion. The reason why these people target only ANiS and not any other organisation is that our rational outlook strikes at the roots of the sanatani brahminical thinking of which they are well-aware. Quite often, these right-wing elements resort to blows and beatings. During the Vivek Jagar programme at Aurangabad, Dr Lagoo was pushed and shoved and I was attacked. In Pune, ANiS activists who were pasting posters to enlighten the public about the activities of Narendra Maharaj were kidnapped filmi-style, and beaten and stripped of their clothes. The police got to know of it by chance and these activists were rescued. The most disgusting aspect of this episode was the felicitation of those devotees who kidnapped and beat ANiS activists as 'dharmaveer' (religious heroes) by Narendra Mahraj. The daily *Sanatan Prabhat* , self-proclaimed mouthpiece of 'Sanatan Indian Culture', propagates violent hatred against ANiS; it pronounces in bold headlines 'ANiS should be given the punishment of being treated like a mad dog, as spelt out by the scriptures to an irreligious king' and warns: 'The ANiS that persistently indulges in anti-religious activities and ruins religion, will have to suffer the same punishment one day according to god's design.' ANiS wants all people, and especially *Sanatan Prabhat* , to know that it is willing to pay the price for fighting orthodox brahminical attitudes.

The Sanatan Sanstha has filed more than a dozen court cases against ANiS, and the damages claimed in these cases exceeds Rs 14 crores.

All the above details are given to prove that, besides ANiS, there are very few organisations who fight head-on all institutions and systems that promote brahminical interests, and thereby spread superstition and support exploitation.

Caste is an institution found only in our country. It is full of superstitious beliefs and practices. The idea that one human being is so pious that the water used to wash his feet becomes

holy, while another is so defiled that even his shadow causes pollution is nothing but superstition. But the caste system is an institution with far more serious effects on society. It is a vicious system of exploitation, and that is why ANiS wants to fight it at all levels. Babasaheb Dr Ambedkar had advocated three principles for the eradication of the caste system. The first principle was inter-caste marriage, the second was a critical examination of the scriptures and the third was economic empowerment of the exploited castes. ANiS attempts to practise the first two principles. Inter-caste couples find refuge in ANiS centres. ANiS also celebrates 1 January, New Year's Day, to mark its appreciation and encouragement of inter-caste marriages and inter-caste couples. These couples are cordially invited and felicitated publicly, and the narration of their experiences enlightens the public about inter-caste marriage.

ANiS regularly carries out critical analyse of obsolete rites and rituals, vows and observances that have been mandated in the scriptures. It believes that reservation in education and employment and allotting a legitimate share in agriculture and other national property to those who were denied these rights because of their caste is essential and just. ANiS negates the caste system not just because it is superstitious, but also because it is a cruel and inhuman system of exploitation. It is the only organisation that has published a charter of social justice and secularism in the field of education.

Both the thoughts and actions of ANiS are transparent, and hence, the accusation that it does not oppose brahminical rituals and brahmin babas and buvas is unsustainable. It is hard to believe that those who blame ANiS on this account do not know the reality. Sometimes, they point to a certain event or a certain baba, and question us as to why we did not condemn that event or expose that baba. We are not always able to tackle a particular incident or baba because our activists are volunteers who have to earn their living, as well as confront the babas in all sorts of adverse situations. Despite their strong will to target every exploitative situation, their numbers, resources and time are a limitation that do not permit ANiS to address every single case. The problem is so huge that it will never be possible to cover all instances of buvabaji, brahminical or otherwise. But I politely wish to tell those who intentionally ask us this wily question, 'My

dear fellows, please try to understand. We are fighting with all our might and yet are unable to cope with the problem. Join hands with us. If it is not your wish to join us, confront the problem on your own. ANiS is sincerely interested in fighting the mental slavery that is engendered by superstition and eager to join hands with anyone who can offer help.'

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5 ANiS was founded in 1989.

6 The book was published in Marathi in 2009. The situation regarding Asaram Bapu has since changed, and the godman has been accused of several crimes and is currently in prison.

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The Source of All This

'You are very fortunate. Your organisation is doing quite well.' A veteran of social movements of Maharashtra said to me during one of our meetings.

I asked him in surprise, 'What do you mean?'

He replied, 'There is no factionalism in your organisation. The question of castes does not bother you; you never seem to be in any financial difficulty despite your many activities; discipline is good; the reputation of the organisation is good; it has prestige . . .'

I did feel a little flattered since what he said was true. The name 'ANiS' is famous in all of Maharashtra. In one of our court cases, even the honourable judge referred to it as ANiS, and I was convinced that ANiS has reached every nook and corner of Maharashtra. The organisation is only twenty years old, and is just coming of age. So all the above accolades are encouraging to the extent that they are true. My own personal experience is that even people who are not directly acquainted with us or hail from areas where we have yet not extended our activities, on hearing my name or the organisation's name, light up and reveal that they know us and have heard of us. Many attempts have been made to slander ANiS, mostly by our adversaries, some by friends too. Some have branded us as 'anti-religious' while others allege that ANiS has been hired by Christian missionaries to carry out anti-Hindu activities. Some see a brahmin conspiracy in it and have tried to cause discord among our members. But all of these attempts have failed to have any effect on our members, leave alone cause any bickering. No one has raised any doubt about our caste or regional prejudice. Our donors had never been stingy, nor have they refused to place advertisements in our

magazine. The organisation remained disciplined and has maintained its position in the media and in the hearts of the people.

I am puzzled at times. Of course, we have made efforts to achieve this. But as an organisation we have refrained from any strict training for our cadre base, nor have we offered any incentives to swell our numbers. And yet things have gone well.

Some reasons for this to happen are obvious and they sound rational. For nearly thirty years after the demise of Dr Ambedkar and Gadge Baba and after the booming gun of the magazine *Kirloskar* became silent, not a word about eradicating superstition could be heard, leave alone criticising religion. It was naively hoped that modernisation and the spread of education and scientific knowledge would automatically reduce superstition. ANiS was founded in 1989 in this vacuum and took it upon itself to fight superstition in an organised way. In the past, such organisations had faded away in a short period of five to seven years. But ANiS has proved an exception to this. It has broadened its horizons and geographical spread through various programmes and activities. It has stood by its mission of wanting to awaken and enlighten people by establishing a dialogue with them. There is hardly any other organisation in Maharashtra that has retained its popularity for over two decades. Popularity, however, is not what we cherish. It is the ever-growing number of honest activists that really counts. We are not interested in hogging the limelight. ANiS has never enticed anybody to provide us with publicity, and every worker has strictly stuck to this policy. The programmes ANiS organises are written about in newspapers and magazines mainly because faith and superstition are issues of concern to all men and women, young and old, of all castes and religions and in every strata of society. Even more important is the fact that the programmes ANiS organises are novel and generate news value unintentionally. The issues discussed in the programmes—such as Searching for a ghost and learning from it, Snake fair, A dashing movement for eradicating Bhanamati, Miracles and the truth behind them and Exposing buvas—certainly excite people's curiosity. But these programmes are also accompanied by certain risks because this work has to be carried out in sensitive areas. The movement and I, personally, had a taste of it at Shani Shinganapur (see Chapter 15). But the

media is aware that our stand is that of restraint and self-discipline, and we do not waver from it. That is why, when there was a great hue and cry against ANiS, when the bill prohibiting black magic was to be introduced, the media was not against us.

Let us now turn to other issues. Whenever I hear favourable comments about ANiS, I am reminded of a book by the famous author Vijay Tendulkar that I liked very much. The title of the book is *He Sare Kuthun Yete* ? (From Where Does All This Come?). To tell you the truth, I just do not know.

As regards discipline, in the several workshops that ANiS organises, activists are told how to interact with people. The worker also learns from the behaviour of his senior colleagues and from discussions with his peers. However, the organisational structure of ANiS is not rigid; it is liberal and relaxed. Usually, such organisations face problems of indiscipline. ANiS has, however, never had to face any such problem. All its programmes at the state level are organised and executed in time and in a perfectly disciplined manner. A number of difficulties arise in these programmes: sometimes refreshments cannot be provided; guests are many and the food available falls short; speeches become boring and at times our workers and volunteers are tired, physically and mentally. These are demanding situations that test one's discipline. But ANiS has always met the challenge successfully. I will describe a memorable incident that demonstrates the cadre's discipline. Some years ago, a satyagraha was organised at Shani Shinganapur to assert women's right to enter the temple. Before that, we observed a three-day fast in front of the district collector's office. The district police chief was at that time pressuring us to withdraw our intended satyagraha. He argued, 'Ahmednagar is a sensitive district. No one can guarantee that the activists coming from all over Maharashtra will behave themselves. There is a likelihood of an untoward incident.' ANiS refused to budge. The satyagraha took place on a very large scale as planned, and in a perfectly disciplined manner. The participants cooperated with the police, as was expected of satyagrahis. They were arrested, and on being released later, went home peacefully. No one went to Shani Shinganapur. The chief police officer of the district was very impressed by the discipline shown by our activists. I had reached Pune after being released, when he he contacted me on phone

and said, ‘No organisation, these days, can guarantee disciplined behaviour of its cadre, and even when an organiser gives such a guarantee, no one ever observes discipline as strictly as your activists did.’ This discipline is, of course, not always visible in the day-to-day affairs or in organisational work. In ANiS branches, meetings are not held regularly. Other organisational customs, too, are flouted at times. But still, the need to demonstrate external and visible discipline is felt acutely.

Every organisation needs financial support; and for an organisation like ANiS that always swims against the current, the going is tough. The Yashawantrao Chavan Pratishthan, Mumbai, supported one of our programmes for a long time. But the main source of our funds is the advertisements we secure for the Diwali special issue of our magazine and donations from our well-wishers. These resources are not steady, and depending on uncertain finances year after year is quite difficult. In planning any activity, the first problem is always money. However, there are two things that reduce the magnitude of this problem. First, ANiS has almost no full-time workers. Most of our activists have to earn their living for themselves and their families, and thus, ANiS stands second in their list of priorities. The central office cannot afford to and does not give any monetary aid towards the running of the branch offices; the office-bearers themselves have to raise all the money they need. At the state level, the executives meet three times a year, travelling at their own expense. There is no central office and no office staff, like clerks and peons, not even premises. (This does cause some inconvenience, although by and large the machinery runs smoothly.) All of these things constitute one part of the system. The other part is the finance, which comes through advertisements and donations every year, and is sufficient for all our activities. For us, this is also a sign that people want the movement to continue its fight. All these helping hands from all over Maharashtra are a source of strength to us.

Most movements in Maharashtra, despite their declared liberal or secular objectives, are based on a specific caste. Movements that are not caste-based to begin with, inadvertently tilt towards a single caste as one caste group becomes dominant. Then, these organisations have to work hard to maintain a balance of all castes in their structure. In this respect, the

position of ANiS is enviable. Our membership represents all castes in all its branches, but ANiS had never considered caste as its base for building and sustaining the movement. In electing its office-bearers at branch, district and state levels, the caste of the activist is never taken into consideration. And yet, at all levels, the office-bearers of ANiS happen to come from all castes. We believe that this is because the organisation has been broad-based and inclusive right from the very beginning.

Differences of opinion and human frailties, like individual likes and dislikes, hatred and jealousy, competition and rivalry, are inevitable in any organisation. That is why we need to remain vigilant and prevent ANiS branches from being burdened by these issues. ANiS has almost achieved this at the state level. The executive president of every organisation needs to act like a fire-fighter and extinguish outbreaks of differences among the various branches. Fortunately, I have rarely had to tackle such a situation.

Two more characteristics of the working of ANiS need to be mentioned. The organisation basically works to awaken reason in people's minds. Our activists can be unrelenting about their own thoughts and ideas. Taking a decision becomes very difficult, because it is not possible to satisfy everyone. Voting is one solution, but it is also necessary to see that differences do not arise in the first place. Members of the state-level Working Committee of MANiS (Maharashtra ANiS) meet every four months. There have been sixty such meetings in the last twenty years. There have also been plenty of heated discussions and arguments and differences of opinion; but during this twenty-year period, with just one exception, all decisions have been taken unanimously. Those who were in the minority never asked for division of votes, leave alone walking out of the meeting. This decision-making process, which has been instituted with everyone's approval, is a great strength of the organisation.

But ANiS and its activists have had to stand trial in a different area altogether. Society keenly observes whether a person who proposes an alternative line of thinking actually acts in accordance with it. Does he walk the talk? Some principles, like not eating non-vegetarian food or being a teetotaller, are easy to put in practice. These are accepted by society. However, when I say that I don't perform the Satyanarayana Pooja, do not

choose an auspicious time for marriage, will not check the horoscope and refuse to fast on certain days for religious reasons, then I am branded an obstinate heretic. Again, some rituals like poojas are to be performed with one's partner and not alone. And sticking to one's principles might involve hurting one's partner, causing internal strife in married life. Religious rituals, traditions and rites are acknowledged practices of society. When one refuses to participate in them, one alienates oneself from society. So, instead of suffering from mental tension all the time, one might choose to give in to society's pressure and join in performing the rites and rituals despite being a non-believer, keeping one's principles aside for a while. But this easy option is not available to ANiS activists. Society keenly observes their actions with respect to rites and rituals, customs and traditions, observances and fasts. There are thousands of activists in the 200 branches of ANiS in Maharashtra. But no one has ever accused any of these activists of being hypocrites who talk a lot and dither when it comes to practice. Complete agreement between thought and action, the talk and walk, among all its activists is the biggest strength of the Samiti.

It is not my intention here to paint a purely rosy picture of ANiS: good discipline is maintained; there is no financial anxiety; casteist elements are kept away; there are no factions; ANiS is getting enough publicity, etc. All that I am recording here is, in fact, only a depiction of my own experiences and some thinking aloud. When I look back, I am puzzled about how we accomplished all this. I really don't know. But when I reflect on this question, I can only say that every individual in the organisation by nature is rational and sensitive. Another thing that must have helped ANiS is that the eradication of superstition is not acceptable to the majority of people. It is a controversial topic that can strain one's relationship with family, relatives and friends. In such a situation, the individual may still remain faithful to his beliefs, but feels forlorn and friendless inside. ANiS is a family of such lonely hearts. It is the inner need of every member in this family to see to it that the family is kept alive and capable of achieving its goal. Then, discipline is automatically attained, and issues of expenses, castes, factions are set aside. The individual works to ensure that his inadequacies and weaknesses do not affect the organisation.

Of course, I am only thinking aloud. What do readers think? Where do they think all this comes from? I am very eager to know.